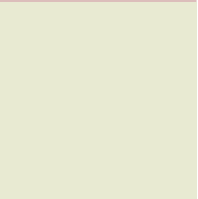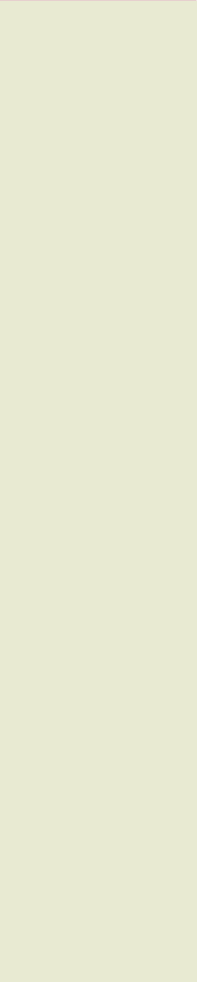# Towards the Actor Coordination Model

A Case of Unaccompanied Minor Migrants in Transition to Adulthood

Edited by

VALERIJ DERMOL

ToKnowPress

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The Best of Both Worlds: Use of Information-Communication Technologies among Teenage Migrants in Slovenia

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Introduction

Information-communication technologies (ICTS) are of great importance in people's everyday lives in Western societies today, and teenagers are no exception. The popularity of ICTS use among teenagers has not gone unnoticed in recent studies (Ito et al., 2010; boyd, 2014; López et al., 2021), arguing that these technologies play a crucial role in youth culture. Yet, little is known about youth migrants' relationships with ICTS and their experiences with them. On the one hand, this population is an integral part of migrants, and on the other hand, teenagers are among the most frequent ICTS users. How teenage migrants perceive and use these technologies can significantly influence their integration process and intercultural communication experiences.

Against this background, the chapter aims to analyse the everyday use of ICTS among teenage migrants in Slovenia. The rationale behind this topic is also in the fact that although a growing body of literature studying youth ICTS practices exists, we are still at the early stages of researching the everyday use of these technologies among migrant youth.

What follows is a general and brief account of the role that ICTS have in allowing the time-space independent action of individuals, which is a key feature of contemporary (network) society. In doing so, we focus

on migrants and their relations with the home country and the host society. The next part presents our field study, implemented among teenage migrants in Slovenia, where we take a closer look at their experience and purpose of ICTS use in everyday lives. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion on the possible future research areas in this field in order to provide further insights into the use of ICTS among youth migrants.

Information-Communication Technologies in the Context of Contemporary Migration Process

Contemporary society is obviously a changing society, which seriously challenges the established or traditional social forms. In comparison with the previous social forms, the specificity of today's relationships and processes lies in the fact that they take place in physical space and cyberspace as well. Namely, individuals' everyday lives show that cyberspace can no longer be treated as a temporary space of social experimenting, strictly separated from physical space (which had been the case approximately two decades ago) but rather as an equivalent of physical space. Metaphorically speaking, there are no two worlds; it is only one.[1] Meaning that physical and cyberspace intertwine and supplement each other.

In this chapter, we are mainly interested in the time-space-independent action of individuals, which is a key feature of contemporary (network) society. At the experiential level, such action enables the world to be perceived as smaller and manageable, which means that actors can interconnect and integrate in new spatial-temporal combinations that transcend territorial and national borders and allow ubiquity, so that certain entities can exist anywhere and at any time. This results in the integration of activities among individuals that are no longer sensitive to (physical) distance from each other. Consequently, despite high levels of physical movement in constant connection with members of their networks, they carry their entire social networks with them at all times. This means that wherever individuals go, emotionally and socially, they never leave their homes. The latter is also one of the main reasons why concepts related to migration processes, such as borders,

[1] At the end of the nineties, a Slovenian internet company advertised its services with the slogan: 'There is no one world, there are two worlds.' Today this slogan would change into: 'There are no two worlds, there is only one world.'

fixedness, presence and distance, have taken on a different meaning than they had two decades ago.

Among other things, the situation presented led to an increased frequency of interactions between family members, relatives, and friends. Castells (2004) refers to this as mobile network society, thus emphasising diffusion of network logic (Castells, 1996) to all areas of social life with the help of wireless (and potentially time-space unlimited) technology.

This condition implies strengthening the social structure conceptualised as a network society (Castells, 1996) through new wireless communication technologies. Therefore, a mutual connection is not (anymore) dependent on temporal-spatial obstacles but available communication technologies. The latter is vital in the contemporary migration processes, where ICTS, their accessibility and different communication services led many migrants to communicate more easily and regularly with people in their home countries, thereby maintaining the so-called transnational networks of support.

Furthermore, as evident from the literature (Baldassar & Laura, 2014; Nedelcu, 2012), these networks provide important resources for emotional and moral, practical, personal, and financial support to migrants, allowing them to maintain cultural traditions, consume various tangible and intangible elements of the original culture, etc. In this way, individuals who are physically distant from the home country remain connected to it. In a sense, ICTS act as a 'social glue' that connects migrants to their home culture, family and friends.

Likewise, ICTS are an important factor in the process of migrant integration into host societies (Lenarčič & Dežan, 2020). Namely, this technology is a valuable tool that allows them to learn about their new social environment (e.g., language, civil rights, cultural traditions, social norms, legal rules, etc.), to form and extend social networks with individuals and groups in the host society, to find employment opportunities, etc. The potential that ICTS have for integration and inclusion for migrants into host societies is also recognised by the EU, which in the *Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027* (European Commission, 2020) reinforces the use of these technologies by stating that they open up new opportunities to modernise and facilitate access to integration.

Based on what has been presented above, ICTS allow migrants to interweave social dynamics from two or more physically and cultur-

ally distant places at the same time, somewhat positioning them neither in the host country nor in the home country, but in both places at the same time, which creates a strong sense of 'in-betweenness.' This situation has dramatically changed the overall migrant experience. As Diminescu (2008) argues, this is a transition from rooted to connected migrant because ICTS allow contemporary migrants almost unlimited simultaneous presence in two cultural contexts, explicitly in a physically distant homeland, as well as in a country where they actually live.

As emphasised in the introduction, the focus of this study is on the everyday use of ICTS among teenage migrants in Slovenia. This research interest stems from various reasons, explicitly: among all ICTS users, teenagers are the most frequent (International Telecommunication Union, 2020), ICTS play a crucial role in the lives of teenagers by providing them with a space to hang out and maintain contact with friends (boyd, 2014) and academic literature about this topic is scarce. Therefore, what follows is the presentation of results obtained in the field research implemented among teenage migrants in Slovenia.

Teenage Migrants and Use of Information-Communication Technologies: The Slovenian Context

Slovenia is characterised primarily by the economic immigration flow from the republics of the once common state of Yugoslavia. It attracts migrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, which is also reflected in the teenage population within our research. According to the existing data, the number of foreign-born children under 15 years of age has increased over the past decade, particularly the number of children from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia that are the most prominent groups of foreign-born children in Slovenia. According to the Slovenian Statistical Office, in 2018, one in eight residents in Slovenia was an immigrant. 250,226 (12.1%) residents of Slovenia are foreign-born, meaning that they immigrated to Slovenia at some point in their lives. There is, however, a lack of data on migrant children and youth in Slovenia, particularly on children in the field of education, where only data on foreign citizenship are available. In the school year 2018/2019, 5.5% of pupils in primary education and 7.4% in secondary education had foreign citizenship.[2]

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[2] https://pxweb.stat.si.

Methodological Explanations

Our discussion on ICTS use among migrant teenagers is based on the data from the MiCREATE project – Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe, funded by the Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Action. The research among the teenager migrants was conducted in secondary schools from January to October 2020, including four secondary schools from different parts of Slovenia that were selected according to the ethnic diversity of pupils attending these schools.

The overall aim of the research was to explore teenagers' subjective understandings and perspectives about their own lives and experiences with migration, life transitions, integration and general well-being (Mayeza, 2017), following the child-centred approach that puts young people in the centre of the research. The participatory observation method (Fine & Sandstrom, 1999) and the collection of autobiographical life stories (Bertaux, 1981; Skinner, 2012) were used to capture their views. For the purposes of this chapter, 30 were analysed in-depth – those of first, second or third-generation migrant children aged between 15 and 19. They were mainly economic migrants who moved to Slovenia with their families from the republics of a former common state Yugoslavia: Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo. While the scope of the research was broader and not explicitly focused on ICTS, for the purposes of this chapter, the role of ICTS in their lives will be explored as identified through the interviews with migrant children. The interviews were non-structured, but the theme of ICTS appeared in children's narratives as they play a significant role in their lives. The nature of this study is exploratory. The aim of the presented results is thus not an in-depth analysis of the use of the ICTS among migrant youth, but the identification of the key areas of ICTS use, as represented in the narratives of children.

Results

In one of the few studies on the use and the role of ICTS in child and youth migration, Raftree et al. (2013) identify three groups of reasons how and why migrant children and young people use ICTS in their everyday lives: for communicating and connecting with family and friends, for accessing information and for accessing services. In our research with migrant youth, two perspectives emerged as particularly relevant concerning the ICTS use, namely, their use to connect with

family and friends and to maintain cultural ties in the country of origin, as well as to connect with family and friends in the country of arrival and thus facilitate the integration in the new environment. This aspect has also been highlighted by Raftree et al. (2013, p. 21), who state: 'In addition to keeping in touch with families and friends back home, children and youth are using ICTS, especially mobiles and online social networks, to keep their support networks intact and to facilitate their own integration into their destination countries.' ICTS thus play an essential role in the bonding and bridging processes of young migrants.

Connecting in the Country of Arrival

It is often reported that technology plays an important role in the lives of young people, as also stated by the 17-year-old girl from Macedonia, who explains the role of ICTS in her life:

> Central [laughter]. For me, central. […] I spend a lot of time with my phone, my computer. I find it interesting.

Like many young people, migrant children reported spending a significant amount of time using smartphones, computers, browsing the internet, listening to music, playing games or communicating. However, ICTS also play a vital role in facilitating integration in the country of arrival and significantly impacts overall well-being (Abujarour & Krasnova, 2017).

For young people, friendships are one of the most important elements of well-being (Ben-Aryeh et al., 2014). Social networks provide an important platform for building new connections in the country of arrival. Teenage migrants expand and maintain social networks by building personal networks through participation on different social network sites (e.g., Facebook, Messenger, TikTok, Viber, Instagram, etc.), online games, etc., in the country of arrival. A migrant who moved to Slovenia six years ago explains that she met most of her friends through social networks (girl, 16 y.o.):

> Then I have friends I met through social networks, and we went out together to meet, and it turned out they are also great friends, and they can be trusted. You have to have time to go out and get to know each other. Then I have another friend here. I hang out with her, and we talk to each other and everything. I met her also through social networks […] Now we are best friends.

However, the narratives of migrant teenagers also frequently highlighted the importance of face-to-face contact and dedicated time. For example, a girl from Bosnia, who has been living in Slovenia for ten years, was critical (girl, 18 y.o.):

> Now young people are very obsessed with these phones and games and all that. But sometimes I voluntarily leave the phone alone, for about two days. […] If it weren't for the phones, I don't think people would even know how to talk to each other. Really, because if you go out with someone, you talk for ten, fifteen minutes and the rest is on the phone. I mean, I lost my interest in going out with this person because I went out intending to talk to you live, not over the phone because I can do it from home. I mean the phones; they're for help, but it does not have such an important role that I couldn't be without a phone.

According to different studies, social networks are associated with better quality of social relationships among migrants, both offline and online (Ogan & Ozakca, 2010; Damian & Van Ingen, 2014). As evident from the quotes, social networks present a place to meet and connect, but face-to-face activities are also important in establishing long-term friendships.

Generally, social networks are integral parts of everyday lives of (migrant) youth related to different domains, such as school and leisure activities. For example, a girl who recently moved to Slovenia describes her daily routine with a group of school friends, which includes chatting and sharing content with friends (girl, 15 y.o.):

> Usually, after school, we go out, get together, work together, help each other – we also hear each other over the phone every day. [Do you have a group?] Yes, always. […] Yes, Messenger. But also through Instagram, or we send each other funny videos; we share everything.

Social network groups with friends from class, where they share information about the school and communicate, are also an important part of everyday life (girl, 17 y.o.):

> Yes, we have two groups, one on Messenger and one on Snapchat […] but basically, we're all included in these groups, and we really talk every day both, about school and just stuff in general.

Practical support for migrant children, such as help with homework and other school-related tasks, is thus made possible through the use of ICTS. According to the young people interviewed, these groups also played a significant role during the Covid-19 school closure and online learning, when they shared school tasks and maintained contact with friends. Through everyday communication, peer learning, help with homework and the like, ICTS play a supportive role, easing youth's integration into a new community (Raftree et al., 2013).

Additionally, friendly relationships maintained through ICTS also provide emotional support in cases of distress (girl, 17 y.o., Bosnia):

> We have a group – D., R., A., A. and me. And I wrote to them that my grandmother had died and then they all called me immediately. So, then it was better.

Friends, like family, play an important, emotionally supportive role in the lives of migrant youth.

Staying in Touch with Family and Friends in the Country of Origin and Maintaining Cultural Ties

Transnational relationships with peers, relatives and friends maintained through ICTS are often overlooked as providers of a significant support network and social capital for migrant youth (Ogden & Mazzucato, 2021). ICTS are thus used to stay in touch and maintain connections with family and friends in the country of origin, to maintain cultural ties and stay in touch with the culture of origin. This was also the case for migrant youth within our research.

Connections with friends and family in the country of origin were often one of the first things mentioned in the narratives of teenagers, like in the case of the 15 years old girl from Bosnia:

> I am 15 years old. I came to Slovenia from Bosnia 4 years ago. I am from XX [city]. […] I miss friends and family from there. We hear each other regularly, over Snapchat and Instagram.

Social network sites enable keeping transnational connections, as reported by a girl who moved from Bosnia 2 years ago (girl, 16 y.o.):

> Yes, we bought my grandma a phone so she can use Viber because she had the old phone without Viber.

Similarly, when asked what the worst thing in her life was, a girl from Macedonia responded that Covid-19 prevented her from visiting her grandparents; however, they maintained contact via the phone (girl, 17 y.o.):

> The worst thing is that I have a grandfather and grandmother in Macedonia. We could not visit them because of Covid-19. I would like them to be here. I have a lot of a family that is not here. [And do you hear each other on the phone?] Yes, on the phone. Regularly.

Family ties are reported to play an important role in the lives of migrant children. Informants expressed that they missed their family and friends and stressed the importance of keeping the family connections active (girl, 16 y.o.):

> I have a brother in Bosnia, I have […] his wife and their daughter, and I miss them a lot. And the rest of the family is there, too. Here, there is only my mother, my father and my younger brother. The rest are in Bosnia.

Similarly, a girl from Bosnia emphasised the importance of ICTS in maintaining supportive contacts with extended family members (girl, 17 y.o.):

> I haven't been there since New Year's. I would so love to go there, rest, and visit my family […] I miss them all. [Are you in contact with them?] Yes, every day. […] I don't know what I would do if there were no social networks. [Who are you in contact with?] Grandfather, grandmother – we hear each other every day. And cousins, aunts – every day, too. We have a group, and we are all part of it, and then we all talk to each other.

As can be seen from the above quotes, maintaining emotional connections with family and friends from the country of origin is particularly important for migrant children. 'Staying in touch' helps them to keep 'mutually supportive relationships across time and space' Baldassar (2007, p. 406). For many migrant teenagers, members of the extended family and friends who live in the country of origin present important anchors (Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2017). Many reported that they still have regular contact and communication with them even after several years in Slovenia. As in the case of this 18-year-old Serbian boy who

has been living in Slovenia for ten years and who regularly communicates with friends and family in Serbia via social media (boy, 18 y.o.):

> We hear each other like twice a week, with cousins and friends there. We have one group, all together.

Teenagers emphasised connecting with transnational family members, which also contributed to forming additional transnational friendships. However, these are related to recurrent visits to the country of origin, as Haikkola (2011) noted. A boy who reported having regular ICT contacts with a group of family and friends in the country of origin also reported visiting them frequently, thus maintaining face-to-face contacts (boy, 18 y.o.):

> I have friends there. I also have cousins, and when we go there, we meet with these old friends. [How often do you go there?] About twice a year. For holidays when we have a new year's break or so.

Regular visits to his country of origin help maintain connections with the members of extended family and friends. In her article on the second generation migrant children and youth, Haikkola (2011) examined transnational social relations. They found that other types of networks often span multiple countries in addition to networks that span places of origin and destination. This is also true for some of the informants in our study who often reported maintaining contacts with friends and family from different countries (girl, 16 y.o.):

> I am 16 years old, soon to be 17. […] In my free time, I love to spend time on my phone, where I communicate with friends and family in Macedonia or Croatia.

Despite the ICTS connections, friendships are fluid. Some migrant children reported that ties with friends from their country of origin loosened over time. For example, one of the migrants explained (girl, 16 y.o.):

> It is not the same as seeing each other live […] at first, we were connected, but over time, these connections were lost.

Conclusion

ICTS play a central role for youth, especially for teenagers, who use them to connect to both worlds, the one they attained in the country

of arrival and the one left behind in the country of origin. Maintaining contacts with family and friends in the country of origin and establishing and connecting with new friends in the country of arrival is realised through ICTS. In this context, it is essential to highlight that these technologies have established an always-on lifestyle (boyd, 2012), resulting in, among other things, an increased frequency of interactions between family members, relatives, and friends. Such constant co-presence (Zhao, 2003) of physically distant individuals is the basis for developing a transnational lifestyle of migrants (Lenarčič, 2020), which includes stable ties and interactions between individuals and their original culture, meaning that it is based on a cultural rather than a geographical/territorial dimension. Additionally, this technology plays an important role in connecting to the new culture and maintaining the culture of origin of migrant children, connecting with the two and sometimes more countries and cultures. One of the exciting aspects for a more in-depth exploring is the idea that this in-between cultural position of migrant teenagers, maintained through the ICTS, is a ground for hybrid and transcultural identities (Bhabha, 1990; Welsch, 1999; Sedmak & Zadel, 2015).

Acknowledgments

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