

**Between Two Screens: Media Consumption and Cultural Identity Among Students
with Migration Background in Argeş County**

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Abstract

This paper examines how university students from families with migration backgrounds in Argeş County, Romania, navigate simultaneous exposure to media from two distinct cultural contexts. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with twelve students whose parents have lived and worked abroad for at least six months, the study applies the polymedia framework (Madianou and Miller, 2012) alongside acculturation theory (Berry, 1997) to explore patterns of media use, language choice, and identity negotiation. Findings indicate that participants do not choose between two competing cultural media environments but construct a hybrid media space in which different platforms serve different identity functions. Romanian-language social media is used primarily for peer interaction and cultural continuity, while media associated with the country of origin is consumed mainly through family-mediated sharing on messaging applications. The tension between these two media streams is rarely experienced as conflict; instead, participants describe a form of selective integration that allows them to maintain multiple cultural orientations simultaneously. These results contribute to the growing literature on transnational media consumption in non-metropolitan, post-migration communities and suggest implications for how communication studies programs in technical universities can address intercultural media literacy.

Keywords: transnational media consumption; polymedia; cultural identity; migration; intercultural communication

Introduction

Circular labor migration has reshaped the social fabric of many Romanian counties over the past three decades. Argeş County, with its industrial base and historically mobile workforce, reflects this pattern clearly: a significant share of households in the region have at least one family member with direct experience of working abroad, primarily in Italy, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom (Sandu, 2010). The children of these migrants, many of whom remained in Romania during their parents' absence or accompanied them temporarily, now form a distinct demographic cohort in Romanian universities. They grow

up in homes where two cultural reference points coexist, often mediated by the screens and platforms that keep transnational families connected.

The question of how this population consumes media has received limited attention in Romanian communication studies, particularly at the regional level. Existing research on transnational media use has focused primarily on first-generation migrants living abroad (Georgiou, 2006; Aksoy and Robins, 2000), leaving the experiences of those who remained in the country of origin while their families moved relatively unexplored. This paper addresses that gap by examining the media practices of students at the National University of Science and Technology Politehnica Bucharest, Pitești University Centre, whose families have migration experience.

The central argument is that these students do not consume media from two cultures in parallel or in competition. Instead, they construct what Madianou and Miller (2012) call a polymedia environment, a space in which different platforms carry distinct relational and cultural meanings, and in which platform choice itself is a form of cultural navigation. Understanding this process matters for communication studies because it reveals how intercultural competence is acquired not in classrooms or through formal exposure but through the everyday management of mediated family life.

Theoretical Framework

Acculturation and Media

John Berry's acculturation framework (1997) identifies four strategies individuals use when navigating two cultural systems: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Applied to media consumption, these strategies map onto observable patterns: a student who watches only Romanian content and avoids media from the migration country is engaging in a form of cultural separation, while one who consumes both actively is practicing integration. Berry's model has been extended to media contexts by Bourhis and colleagues (2009), who show that acculturation orientations influence not only language use but also platform preference and content selection.

However, Berry's framework assumes a degree of conscious cultural choice that does not capture how media use actually unfolds in daily life. Most research participants in studies of transnational youth describe their media habits as practical rather than ideological: they use what their family uses, what their peers use, and what is available in the language they happen to be thinking in at a given moment (Georgiou, 2006). A more granular account requires a framework that treats the platform itself as a unit of analysis.

Polymedia

Madianou and Miller (2012) developed the polymedia framework to describe how migrants and their families navigate an environment of multiple, overlapping communication technologies. The key insight is that in a context where access to different platforms is roughly equal, the choice of medium is never neutral: it carries relational meaning. Sending a voice message on WhatsApp rather than making a phone call, or sharing a news article on Facebook rather than discussing it in person, are choices that encode emotional distance, intimacy, urgency, or cultural affiliation.

Polymedia has been applied primarily to first-generation migrants (Madianou, 2014; Diminescu, 2008), but its logic extends to the children of migrants who remain in the country of origin. For this group, the platforms through which they receive content from abroad,

usually messaging applications used by parents, are qualitatively different from the platforms through which they consume media independently. The framework helps explain why these two streams of media use do not simply merge into a unified cultural experience.

Transnational Media and Identity

Georgiou's work on diasporic media (2006) established that media consumption is a primary site where migrants negotiate between the culture they carry and the culture they inhabit. Aksoy and Robins (2000) complicated the neat binary implied by the term "two cultures" by showing that Turkish migrants in London used satellite television not to affirm a static national identity but to engage critically with a Turkey that had changed in their absence. This finding has implications for the current study: the Romanian students interviewed here may not be consuming "Italian media" or "German media" as coherent cultural packages, but fragmentary content that arrives through family networks and reflects the specific migration trajectory of their households.

More recently, Hepp (2015) has theorized the concept of deep mediatization to describe how media are no longer just channels for cultural content but constitutive of cultural experience itself. For a student whose parent has been working in Italy for five years, the WhatsApp voice messages, the YouTube videos shared in family groups, and the occasional Italian news headline forwarded without comment are not supplements to a family relationship: they are substantial parts of it. Media use and cultural belonging are intertwined in ways that resist separation.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews. The choice reflects the exploratory nature of the research question and the need to capture the contextual reasoning behind media practices, which survey instruments cannot adequately address (Kvale, 2007). The study was approved by the institutional review board of UNSTPB Pitești, and all participants provided informed written consent. Data collection took place between October and December 2025.

Participants

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling from students enrolled in the Communication Sciences program at the Pitești University Centre. A screening questionnaire distributed to three cohorts identified students with at least one parent who had worked abroad for at least six consecutive months. From the resulting pool of thirty-one eligible students, twelve were selected to ensure variation in terms of destination country of parental migration, duration of absence, and whether the student had spent any time abroad themselves. The sample included seven women and five men, aged between nineteen and twenty-four. Parental migration destinations included Italy (five cases), Germany (three cases), the United Kingdom (two cases), and Spain (two cases).

Data Collection

Interviews lasted between thirty-five and fifty minutes and were conducted in Romanian. The guide covered four thematic areas: daily media routines and platform use; language of media consumption; family-mediated media sharing; and self-described cultural

identity. Participants were asked to describe specific recent examples of each practice rather than offer generalizations, a technique that reduces socially desirable responding and produces more concrete data (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). The process involved familiarization with the data through multiple readings, generation of initial codes, development of themes, and iterative review against the full dataset. Analysis was conducted inductively, meaning themes were derived from the data rather than imposed from the theoretical framework. The framework was applied during the discussion stage to interpret the identified patterns. Member checking was conducted with four participants, who confirmed that the reported themes reflected their experience.

Results and Discussion

Platform Use and Language

All twelve participants reported using Romanian-language platforms and content as their primary daily media diet. TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube in Romanian dominated leisure media consumption, while news, when consumed at all, came primarily through Facebook shares from family and peers. None of the participants described actively seeking out news media from their parents' country of origin on their own initiative. This pattern contrasts with the experience of first-generation migrants, who typically maintain stronger ties to home-country media (Georgiou, 2006), and suggests that the children of migrants in Romania occupy a different media position than has been theorized.

The migration-country media that did reach participants arrived through family channels, almost exclusively via WhatsApp. Parents and relatives abroad shared video clips, news articles, and voice messages in the host country's language, but participants described consuming this content passively and often without full comprehension. Five participants whose parents had migrated to Italy could understand spoken Italian to varying degrees but did not independently seek Italian media. As one participant explained: "My mother sends me things she finds funny or things she thinks I should know. I watch them because she sent them, not because I would have looked for them."

Platform as Relational Marker

Consistent with the polymedia framework, participants assigned different relational meanings to different platforms. WhatsApp was described as a channel for family connection, carrying content that felt both intimate and obligatory regardless of its cultural origin. When a parent abroad shared a news item from an Italian newspaper, the act of sharing mattered more than the content itself. Facebook served a different function: it was the primary space for extended family communication in Romania, carrying content that reinforced local cultural belonging. Instagram and TikTok were described as personal spaces with few connections to migration experience.

This stratification of platforms by relational function rather than cultural identity aligns with what Madianou and Miller (2012) describe as the ecology of polymedia. Participants were not choosing between Romanian and foreign media as competing cultural loyalties; they were using different platforms for different kinds of social work, and the cultural

content of each platform was a byproduct of who was on it rather than a deliberate identity statement.

Identity Negotiation and Selective Integration

When asked directly about their cultural identity, participants expressed a strong and uncomplicated identification with Romania. None described feeling torn between two cultures or experiencing the kind of hyphenated identity documented in studies of second-generation migrants living abroad (Berry et al., 2006). However, several participants described a form of selective cultural capital that they attributed to their family's migration experience: familiarity with a foreign country, some competence in a second language, and a sense that they understood life options that their peers without a migration background did not.

This self-perception did not translate into active engagement with foreign media, but it did influence how they interpreted content that arrived via family channels. Participants who had visited their parents abroad at least once described a richer engagement with the shared content: they could situate it geographically and socially, giving it meaning beyond its surface. This finding echoes Aksoy and Robins's (2000) observation that media use only becomes culturally productive when it is connected to lived experience, not when it is consumed as an abstract foreign cultural product.

Implications for Intercultural Communication Education

The study's setting, a communication sciences program within a technical university, adds a layer of relevance. The participants had received formal instruction in intercultural communication theory, yet described their family-mediated media practices in entirely practical terms, with no reference to the frameworks they had studied. This gap between theoretical knowledge and lived media experience suggests that intercultural communication curricula could benefit from incorporating students' own transnational media practices as objects of analysis. The material is close at hand: in regions with high migration rates such as Argeş County, a significant share of any student cohort carries the kind of bicultural media experience this study examines.

Conclusions

This paper has examined the media practices of twelve university students with migration-background families in Argeş County and found that their engagement with two cultural media environments is neither symmetrical nor conflictual. Romanian-language media dominates independent consumption, while foreign-origin media arrives primarily through family-mediated sharing on WhatsApp and is consumed in a relational rather than cultural mode. The polymedia framework captures this pattern well: the platform determines the content's meaning, and platform choices reflect social relationships rather than cultural allegiances.

The findings contribute to the literature on transnational media use by shifting focus from first-generation migrants living abroad to their children remaining in the country of origin, a population that has been underexamined. They also suggest that post-migration communities in non-metropolitan Romania develop intercultural media competence through family life rather than through formal education, which has implications for how communication studies programs in this context might be designed.

Several limitations apply. The sample is small and drawn from a single institution and program, which limits transferability. Future research could extend this work through larger survey-based studies or by comparing students from programs with different disciplinary profiles within the same university. A longitudinal design tracking how media practices evolve as parental migration becomes more distant in time would also be valuable.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks the students who participated in this study for their time and willingness to discuss their media practices in detail.

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