

# **HOSTING AS SOCIAL PRACTICE: Gendered Insights into Contemporary Tourism Mobilities**

## **ABSTRACT**

By giving voice to highly-skilled mobile professional women who have relocated to Switzerland from various European countries, representing different nationalities, duration of migration and family circumstances, we shed light on the experiences of hosting – an under-researched segment of Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) mobilities. Our findings reveal a threefold investigation to sociality, tourism and mobility, by drawing on empirical insights to three angles: that of, culture, intimacy and identity as pathways to transformative social practices among hosts and guests. Highly-skilled mobile professional women’s hosting practices reflect a laboratory of sociality whereupon relations of closeness and proximity are tested under new conditions of social and private life in the new destination country.

**KEY WORDS:** visiting friends and relatives; sociality; hosting; gendered tourism; highly-skilled mobile professional women; transnational care

## INTRODUCTION: Sociality, Tourism and Mobility as a threefold approach to understanding mobile women's social networks

While the role of social networks has been a core focus in the investigation of mobility strategies, motives and integration in migration literature (e.g. Thieme, 2006), it has been identified as a neglected theme in tourism research where scholarship has overlooked issues of sociality, corporeality and the face-to-face proximity of kin and social relations (e.g. Larsen, Urry, & Axhausen, 2007). In responding to the latter call by Larsen et al. (2007) to contribute to the void in a combined approach to tourism and migration studies, this paper examines issues of sociality with significant others, issues of power in social relationships in such settings, embodied socialities and corporeal proximities in the geographical 'stretching out' of social networks in VFR trips (ibid, 2007, p. 247). At the same time, it focuses on the lived sociologies of tourism as shaped by the social geographies of such mobilities. An interdisciplinary lens is adapted to explore the sociality of tourism while being attentive to both the sociological and geographical imagination that the combined study of tourism and mobility offers, in unveiling the deeper layers of power entanglements that social actors experience in the everydayness of social life.

This paper focuses on the under-researched aspect of VFR mobilities – hosting – which impacts on individuals' well-being, their settlement and integration (Griffin, 2014; Shani & Uriely, 2012), has the potential of shaping the image of the city (Humbracht, 2015) and plays a key role in tourism destinations from an expenditure point of view (McKercher, 1996; Backer, 2007). The empirical data for this paper comes from a study researching professional mobile women who left their countries of origin and now live and work in the Swiss city of Basel. Using twenty in-depth interviews, the study sheds light on women's experiences of hosting visitors from back 'home', that is, their respective European countries of origin. Highly-skilled professionals or 'Eurostars', as termed by Favell (2011) in his seminal work on West European movers, tend to define themselves as 'expats' or 'free movers' rather than 'migrants' – a term carrying increasingly negative connotations associated with influxes of low-paid migrants to Europe (King, Lulle, Morosanu, & Williams, 2016). In this paper, a term: *highly-skilled mobile professional women* is adopted in order to emphasise the focus on a very elite group of foreign professionals with the right to live and work in Switzerland.

In addition, this research gives voice to *women*, whose voices are often omitted in tourism research (Figueroa-Domecq, Pritchard, Segovia-Pérez, Morgan, & Villacé-Molinero, 2015), but who are portrayed as the ones maintaining meaningful family ties; involved in the mental, manual and emotional work in order to sustain their families transnationally (e.g. Baldassar & Merla, 2014). Having a closer and more intimate relationship with their family members in the home country than men, they are more likely to perform and

receive frequent visits related to the provision of emotional and health care support (e.g. Pustulka & Ślusarczyk, 2016), thus giving evidence to the *feminization of caring*. This is no different in tourism; in the tourism and leisure contexts, women are never free from obligations and caring responsibilities (e.g. Henderson & Allen, 1991).

Following Larsen (2008, p. 23), VFR mobilities are seen as “*emblematic forms of ‘sociability’*” – interactions between people who enjoy each other’s company (Simmel, 1997). This paper is concerned with the particular modalities that characterise such socialities of VFR tourism, be that, caring roles of mothering/motherhood, grand-parenting/parenthood, sibling and friendship relations, to the varying layers of cultural translation and role negotiation that social relations incur due to space-time and mobility changes over the life course. Also addressed are both the tyranny and transformative potential that hosting has as a social practice where areas of intra/inter-generational friction, dis/content, dis/pleasure can emerge and become acts of learning for personal and family relations. Such encounters can also act as an arena for self-validation and empowerment when a new habitus of intimacy, trust, kinship, cultural politics unfolds and where hosting obligations stretch the limits of familiarity and distancing in sharing new locations and experiences. Hence, hosting reflects a laboratory of sociality whereupon relations of closeness and proximity are tested under new conditions of social and private life. Finally, the focus is on corporeal proximity, being physical and embodied, that VFR entails as ‘*people are bodily in the same space as various others*’ (Urry, 2002, p.258). A layer of gender insight is provided to examine embodied hosting experiences. This paper attempts to deconstruct the gendered corporeality of social practices through a feminist insight of the tourist gaze in further grounding tourism studies in the embodied, affective and performative sphere of social relations. By focusing exclusively on women’s voices, it contributes to the body of literature which still remains marginal – tourism gender inquiry (e.g. Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015; Wilson & Harris, 2006).

### *Deconstructing Social Networks in Tourism and Mobility Studies*

This paper builds upon the previously neglected area of sociality and co-presence in tourism studies (Larsen et al., 2007; Larsen, 2008; Gössling, Cohen, & Hilbert, 2018). Although the enhancement of kinship relationships as a tourism motivation was noted in early tourism studies (Crompton, 1979), more recently, Larsen et al. (2007) posited that tourism involves connections with, rather than escape from, social relations and the multiple obligations of everyday social life. With social networks becoming more geographically dispersed, obligations and travel for physical co-presence became key motivations to engage in contemporary tourism. Gössling et al. (2018) contend that tourism is increasingly concerned with ‘*connectness*’, arguing that basic human emotions such as loneliness which are already used in tourism marketing campaigns for low-cost airlines, Easyjet or Ryanair, are key selling points for travel. Tourism

becomes a mechanism for connectness; *'it is no longer an option, rather a necessity for sociality'* (p. 1586), and VFR acts as a major motivation to perform the trip. Increasingly it is also driven by the new global care arrangements, a theme significantly absent from the tourism scholarship although evident in marketing campaigns, for example Easyjet's "Granny Charmers" portraying a toddler.

Increasingly VFR networks take place not only in the original 'home' area, but also migrants' new destinations as well as on neutral territory; 'third spaces' (Janta, Cohen, & Williams, 2015). The hosting aspect of VFR mobilities studies has received little attention despite its recognition of being beneficial for both stayers and migrants, important for maintaining relationships, integration and migrant well-being as well as having important consequences for tourism development (McKercher, 1996; Backer, 2007; Shani & Uriely, 2012; Choi & Xu, 2018). While *visiting* the homeland, rather than being a relaxing experience, may potentially be physically and psychologically draining as well as financially challenging (Pustulka & Ślusarczyk, 2016), *hosting* provides various opportunities for migrants and their guests. Griffin (2014) argues that hosting eases migrants' integration: *'for immigrants the home needs re-establishing upon arrival and the experience of hosting people who are close may help foster this feeling'* (p. 493). In a recent study of host-sojourners in Macao, Choi and Xu (2018) note that, many hosts were delaying their first visit to certain attractions, awaiting their family to visit them and co-experience touristic hallmarks. The fact that the hosts *'saved the first-time experience with significant others'* to explore tourist sites (p.53) reinforces the special meaning attached to such visits by migrants. Yet, in some cases, the destination rather than the host is a more important motivator to engage in VFR mobilities (e.g. Backer, 2008).

Studies focusing on hosts in Australia highlighted the sheer scale of the VFR segment and its typically underestimated economic importance. McKercher (1996) concluded that *'the residents are prolific hosts'* (p.702); welcoming and entertaining friends or relatives for overnight stays multiple times per year, while Backer (2007) detailed the main expenditures made by hosts (on leisure, restaurants and cafes, groceries, and liquor), highlighting the numerous economic sectors that benefit from VFR. Research also shows that hosts adopt various styles of hosting. For example, Young, Corsun & Baloglu (2007) developed a taxonomy of hosts portraying *Ambassadors, Talkers, Magnets* and *Neutrals*. Behaving like "salespeople", the first two types of hosts convince their friends and relatives to visit and then they also join them in activities. Other hosts are less engaged. Shani and Uriely (2012) found in their study with local residents in Israel that hosts focus on either in-home hospitality or outdoor entertainment; their level of hospitality differs from maintaining the normal course of daily life (a self-orientated hosting style) to serving as a local tourist guide or becoming a tourist in one's own backyard (a guest-orientated style). Finally, the importance of hosts in shaping the image of the destination presented to their visitors has also been noted (e.g. Humbracht, 2015; Yousuf & Backer, 2017). The city and country with its culture and lifestyle are presented to migrants'

visitors in a largely positive light. All these studies point to a vital role played by hosts in these touristic experiences.

In one rare study comparing the experiences of hosting two groups: relatives versus friends, Yousuf and Backer (2017) found that hosting friends required more formalities and effort from hosts in order to satisfy their needs, impress or indulge them. The opposite findings are shown in a study by Schänzel, Brocx & Sadarka (2014) highlighting the contextual importance of social responsibilities. “Giving all” characterises Polynesian hospitality; hosts in New Zealand accept relatives’ extended sojourns, even when it puts stress, loss of privacy and financial hardship on them. Hosting is defined as *unconditional*, with: ‘*no perceived limits to the hospitality extended*’ leading to ‘*a personal burden or obligation to share everything*’ (Schänzel et al., 2014, p. 145). Yet, gender and age differences can be observed with men and younger hosts being objective and critical towards the provision of a particularly generous character of hosting visitors in New Zealand. Such extended visits to immigrants are also portrayed by Capistrano and Weaver (2017), although with very different motivations: Filipino parents spend weeks or months abroad providing childcare to their children living in New Zealand. These two rare empirical studies give evidence of the emerging link between VFR mobilities and new global care arrangements – themes strongly present in this study focusing on women voices.

### *Methodological Insights into the Study of Highly Skilled Professional Mobile Women*

This paper is part of a project examining how mobile professional women maintain physical and online co-presence in terms of kinship ties and friendship levels. An interpretative qualitative research approach was chosen as the appropriate method to data collection; useful in gender research which reflects complex issues adding to meaningful and deeper insights (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015). The chosen method of data collection, face-to-face in-depth interviews, helped encourage interviewees to be reflective and open, particularly as one of the researchers (‘the interviewer’) shares some characteristics with the participants in the study. The scholar is also part of the research and explicit positioning and self-reflection are important components of conducting gender research (Järviluoma, Moisala, & Vilkkö, 2003). The interviewer, a mobile professional woman, although not employed in Switzerland at the time of the fieldwork, shared some similarities with the professional group, such as age and a highly-skilled profession, which was a key factor that led to building trust. On the other hand, however, it is acknowledged that the interviewer’s positionality may be considered as a potential limitation; her visiting and hosting experiences inspired to ask specific questions, therefore potentially impacting on the construction of the interview guide.

Switzerland, which is not a European Union member state, attracts professionals in particular sectors such as the pharmaceutical industry, medical professions, scientists or architects. The study was conducted in Basel, an international city, where foreign citizens account for 36% of its total resident population (Basel Statistical Office, 2017). Rather than focusing on one, ethnically-defined group – common in studies on VFR hosting (e.g. Filipino migrants in Capistrano & Weaver, 2017 or Polynesian migrants by Schänzel et al., 2014) – this research goes ‘beyond the ethnic lens’ (Amelina & Faist, 2012), it abandons the dichotomy of insider/outsider and focuses on women from various nationalities but all European, to allow for some degree of comparison with regard to the geographical distance.

Twenty in-depth interviews with women originating from various European countries were carried out in 2015 and 2016. The participants were accessed via multiple entry choices; some were introduced to the interviewer by Swiss friends, others were contacted via regular events (social media platforms such as MeetUp or Swissforum), German weekly classes for architects, snowball sampling or by chance. The topic was communicated via email to participants ahead of the interview and the ‘interviewer’ explained the meaning of ‘informed consent’, making it clear that data were collected for the purpose of research and that pseudonyms would be used in order to maintain participant confidentiality. Each interview had a semi-structured format and covered women’s demographic information, their brief migration history including motivations to move to Basel, maintaining relations back home and general experiences with hosting visitors. This part of the interview started with an open question, such as: “*Please tell me about your experience of hosting visitors from home*” which usually led to a longer narrative but other probing questions (the frequency of visits, their timing, local activities, gifts, items brought) were also included. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in cafes, bars, parks, by the river, and occasionally the interviewer was invited to participants’ homes, particularly by those with childcare responsibilities. Each venue was chosen by the participants, reflecting their own desire of the most comfortable location. Each interview lasted between forty to seventy minutes and the majority of them were carried out in English, the language all participants spoke. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data were subject to manual thematic analysis, involving a 6-phase guide of basic precepts suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Following the guidelines, the analysis started with *data familiarization* by repeated reading of the transcripts, followed by *generating initial codes* (joy of hosting, customised trips, guilt when not taking care of visitors, unwanted visits, redefining relationships, crisis care, cooking), *searching for themes*, that is collating codes into potential themes (intercultural dialogue, types of care, empowerment, reflection), *reviewing themes* (culture, care, agency), *defining and naming final themes* (practices of culture, intimacy and identity), and finally, *producing the paper*, including selection of extract examples.

The researchers aimed to obtain a diverse sample with regard to age, life stage and occupation although accessing working mothers proved to be more challenging due to their lack of availability. The participants – deliberately selected due to their elite status – were all employed in highly-skilled occupations as architects, managers and medical doctors; their ages range from twenty three to forty-three years, the majority have completed at least one Master’s degree although most possess a Doctoral degree. In other words, they represent elite migrants. Of the participants, seven were single women, and the rest were either married or living with a partner, eight had children. The interviewees had arrived in Switzerland between 2003 and 2014, with the average time of residence being 6 years (see Table 1). In the majority of cases they experienced student exchanges, internships and other kinds of international mobility opportunities, before migrating to Switzerland for career reasons, and only two women followed their partners. Reflecting on their visits home and relatives visiting from home could have potentially been a sensitive experience. For that reason participants were reminded that they did not need to answer the questions that were upsetting to them. Although all the questions were discussed during the interview, for some women reflecting on their VFR mobilities and their respective ancestral homeland was indeed an emotional experience and included several moments of sadness and nostalgia.

## VFR ENCOUNTERS

In exemplifying the findings of the study this paper presents a threefold discussion of sociality, tourism and mobility during VFR encounters. *Culture, intimacy and identity* are pathways to transformative social practices among hosts and guests. These are discussed in turn below.

### *A culture based transformative practice of the interplay of sociality/tourism/mobility*

The first theme emerging from the study is that of sight-seeing as a pathway to social integration, both in transmitting knowledge of the local history and built environment, but also in internalising this process as a form of intercultural dialogue between migrants, guests and host country. This is categorised as a *culture based transformative social practice of the interplay of sociality/tourism/mobility*.

The first core instance in VFR encounters is *sight-seeing as a pathway to social integration*. Regular presence of family and friends in Switzerland was a key feature in the women’s everyday lives. Leisure and tourism activities were an important component of all types of visits to Basel – a hub to a borderless and passport-free Europe – a cultural capital of Switzerland where the three regions of Switzerland, France and

Germany meet. Visitors' sojourn patterns in Basel varied from occasional trips, yearly visits, to frequent, regular multiple times a year stays. Enjoyment and pride of undertaking a new role of a host, tourist and tourist-agent as well as discontent, regret and guilt when forced to reluctantly take limited time off or host burdensome guests; all were part of hosting experiences.

While the primary motive of each visit to the migrant varies (Janta et al., 2015), from celebrating important life events, providing childcare, maintaining contacts, all visits from the homeland included tourism activities. In most of the narratives, the experience of hosting guests was recalled as 'special', 'meaningful' and 'holiday time'. In her interview, Celine described hosting visitors most of the summer weekends as not a chore but sheer joy:

*We like receiving visits, organizing things. We still keep in touch, over the Internet but it is nice to see each other once or twice a year. (...). Yes, it is great. I enjoy very much when they come. (...) We do not have more holidays left this summer but we have people coming to us so it is almost like having a holiday. (Celine, French, Engineer, 29 yrs old, Spanish husband)*

For Celine, like many other participants, hosting allows maintaining relations with friends and family from different destinations. (Re)discovering old and new places in Basel and around with guests from the ancestral home was associated with relaxation and escape from everydayness. Previous studies in Sweden (Humbracht, 2015) and Australia (Yousuf & Backer, 2017) demonstrated that hosts shape an image of what they present to their visitors from home; showcasing the lifestyle and culture of the city and country. Creating such tourist experiences for their guests allows them to defend their own mobility. The participants' narratives confirm that: women make particular efforts to design and present an array of itineraries to their guests, involving translocal activities. Because of the unique location they live in, visitors are taken to the city but also to Alsace in France, the nearby German Black Forest, as well as Austria and Italy. Equipped with a range of ready-made itineraries with choices for people of different ages, interests, tempos, professions and incomes, the women transmit local knowledge of their new destination and engage in cultural transformation. They design itineraries that accommodate their guests' needs or simply please them:

*We are taking the special train, it is like a panoramic train, you can visit Switzerland like that going through the valley. Once I had my uncle coming, and he cannot walk so much, so this was a good alternative. (Celine, French, Engineer, 29 yrs old, Spanish husband)*

While Celine chose a panoramic train ride for her less mobile relative, Julia, a single mother hosting friends with children focused on leisure activities which reflect the yearly calendar of Basel events, including Carnival, Museum Night, Autumn Fair or Christmas Market:



*We do a lot of excursions here. I'm really a tourist guide here. (...) They often visit me when there is a carnival here in Basel (...). Then we go to the snow, that is also a reason, they can see snow. We do some excursions here, in nature, in the Alps, or the Black Forest. (...) Sometimes I am working but many of my friends know everything here and they go on their own. (...) So they plan something for the day but then we go home in the afternoon and we do something together. (Julia, German, Medical Doctor, 35 yrs old, single mother of 4 yrs old Tomas)*

Visits from the homeland leading to tourism activities turn the women into hosts, tourists and tourist-agents, emphasising their independence and being in control of making choices, in a similar manner that solo woman travellers experience (e.g. Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Wilson & Harris, 2006). New rituals are being created between the residents and their guests – taking part in yearly leisure activities that Basel has on offer or enjoying Swiss snowy winter landscapes. Not only trips tailored-made for less physically able guests, such as uncles and grandmothers, but also itineraries for people of certain interests and professions were key features of visits. From visiting Basel's forty two museums for art-lovers, the Zoo for families, to unique architectural buildings – diverse customised tours were designed to meet visitors' expectations, interests and budgets. For women, travelling provides them with freedom from the demands of everyday life, empowers and helps to (re)consider their relationships and life perspectives (Wilson & Harris, 2006). This study suggests that hosting and touring in new destinations have similar transformative potential.

Illustrating a chain of hospitality, at times, guests who visit Basel multiple times a year, became hosts themselves while bringing their own travel companions:

*My parents, I think they come at least 3 times per year and when they come they stay here for at least 2 weeks. (...) They come with their own friends sometimes, so my house is a bit like a hotel (laughter). Then it doesn't matter if I'm here or not, they can do whatever they want to. My mom would bring her girlfriends or they bring other couples sometimes. They show them the cities in Switzerland. And this is relaxing for me because I know from other people that visitors are scared, can be scared to go out. My parents are very independent. (Sofia, Greek, Manager, 36 yrs old, single)*

Sofia's case is a fascinating account of not only reduced obligations to host or to entertain guests, a task which is passed onto Sofia's visiting parents, but also a testament of her parents developing a place connection in her new homeland. This place-making is shaped by the translocal tourist activities they spearhead in Switzerland showing the major cities and their cultural landscapes to their Greek friends who join them. This also becomes an empowering activity for both Sofia who can maintain her free time and keep her schedule intact, as well as her parents, who although Greeks, residing in Greece, have become comfortable with their newly found independence as guests who host and guide other guests. Interestingly, this gives evidence of further potential of VFR mobility; where VFR tourists generate yet another VFR tourist flow.

Sofia further reflects on the cultural transformations that her family encountered through participating in one of the key local events, a yearly winter carnival called in Swiss German: 'Fastnacht':

*So we did all the Fastnacht activities, fires in Liestal, the morning parade at 4am. We did all of that. My parents find it here more interesting. They see that people here preserve their own culture. In Greece we want to be more modern, you want to get rid of these traditional things sometimes. They really liked that and they were impressed.*

Sofia's account illustrates the potential outcome of the intercultural dialogue: reflection that leads to a change in tourism behaviour among visitors. That further enhances independence and cultural awareness. These elements are pivotal outcomes of enhanced social practices during the interplay of mobility and tourism.

Although receiving guests in this research was seen in a largely positive light, occasionally, loss of privacy and change of routine was perceived as disruptive, which resulted in intra/inter-generational friction. In a few cases the visits from the homeland triggered uncomfortable reflections. Silke for example, became the 'exploited' host' (Yousuf & Backer, 2017), when entertaining friends from Germany who visited her rather 'accidentally': due to cheap flights friends decided to spend a week at her place. Indeed in some instances the destination is more important than the host (Backer, 2008), and Larsen et al. (2007) remind that VFR travel may be damaging to social relations when it takes place because of the location and the free accommodation and not because of the relationship. Unexpected, last-minute guests can also be a burden, especially if they require extra attention and are unwilling to contribute to any division of labour. Maeve's account is a good example indicating how relations of proximity and closeness are tested under a new setting:

*... my cousin came here. (...) She was in Italy, and she texted me three days before: 'Can I come visit you? Like next week'. (...) She stayed for a week. (...) she is very nice and everything but she wanted me to pick everything. I was like: 'are you hungry?' and she was like: 'yeah, I don't mind'. And every single thing. And I had this interview on Monday, so I really wanted to prepare for it. But she was still there, and she is like my boyfriend, and I was like: 'what do you feel like eating? And they were both like: 'I don't mind'. They just wanted me to pick everything. I didn't have time for myself, you know, I couldn't sit with my laptop even. That was actually nice when it was over. (Maeve, Irish, Engineer, 24 yrs old, Irish partner)*

Under the conditions of private life the relationship with Maeve's cousin did not strengthen, quite the opposite; she realised that she hosted a distant cousin and perceived the time spent together as stressful and unproductive. An overstaying guest required an increased effort and interfered with her urgent professional plans – to prepare for a job interview. On the other hand, Maeve's boyfriend appeared to be uninvolved in any domestic and hosting responsibilities, reinforcing these tasks as designated for females.

Such an experience indicates that new cultural learning may be required to take place in clarifying family relations before they become burdensome. In Maeve's case above, learning from this disruptive and demanding hosting of her cousin, could potentially become a vehicle of developing more honest conversations with both her partner and her cousin. Such an action can further empower Maeve to prioritise in the future her own needs, rather than sacrificing unnecessarily her time and energy while jeopardising professional opportunities. Although it is unknown if Maeve's interview performance was challenged by the lack of free time that her cousin's unexpected visit imposed, one can nevertheless speculate from her narrative extract that it was not helped either.

Overall, the narratives indicated that the women continued with their working lives and daily routine while hosting. Taking days off seemed to be precious, reserved for very special occasions, such as their own long haul travel or personal visits home. Nevertheless, constrained by their cultural norms, some women felt obliged to play the role of a full-time host. Georgia, a dentist from Greece, felt guilty when not taking sufficient time off to dedicate entirely to her visitors from Greece:

*When my brother or my cousin came, I took holidays (...). Because they came all that way here and usually they don't speak the language and then they are alone. (Georgia, Greek, Dentist, 33 yrs old, single)*

Engaging in tourism experiences with visitors from home served as an arena for transformation for both the women and their guests. Joy, celebration and pleasure, as well as friction, guilt and anger were all part of hosting. While for many women, hosting guests from home enabled them to reinforce a sense of authentic togetherness through tourism (Wang, 1999), for others, it resulted in a realization that natural and desired bonds cannot be achieved. Hosting, touring and entertaining provided space for learning about self and relations with others – a theme echoed in tourism research on women (e.g. Wilson & Harris, 2006). Apart from the direct impact on the local and global economy, VFR encounters through sight-seeing and other cultural activities have an important contribution to make in both social relations and integration with communities. Beyond the ritual of becoming acquainted with local traditions, new cultural connections are made between hosts and visitors through the very social and cultural geographies of the destination country.

#### *An intimacy based transformative social practice of the interplay of sociality/tourism/mobility*

The second theme in this research is caring practices in hosting as embodied, affective and performative links to strengthening mother-daughter relations, familial-parental roles and friendships in sustaining intimacy and trust. This is categorised as an *intimacy based transformative social practice of the interplay of sociality/tourism/mobility*.

Caring provides a new social pathway to revisit relations. Driven by the school calendar year, work obligations but also a family crisis, the women were recipients of extensive care support from the homeland, provided by one or both parents and occasionally by siblings. All mothers in this study were receiving childcare support from their families back home, including Julia and Chiara, both single mothers:

*When my mom comes, then, sometimes it is for a reason that I need her help to look after Tomas. For example, I have a training in November, and I have to go to Bern so then she comes with me, so we travel the three of us, my mother, Tomas and I, and she stays with me in a flat or a hotel and she looks after him. Also sometimes at home. For some reason I may have to work more, or maybe go to a lecture, or something like that, then she comes and looks after him. We also do some excursions but less. (Julia, German, Medical Doctor, 35 yrs old, single mother of 4 yrs old Tomas)*

The case of Tirol-raised Chiara further illustrates the complexity of caring arrangements and also the question of care replacement. Not only the ten hour distance between Basel and South Tirol was problematic in making frequent visits (by car or train), but also competing obligations to provide childcare to the other sister added to the complexity of the transnational care arrangement:

*When Antonio was small and I had to work shifts as a doctor, they came every 3-4 weeks. Now I have a different job. My sister in South Tirol was a bit angry of course, because then she didn't have their support. (...) My mother is really a mother. (...) she makes dinner, prepares things for Antonio, bathes him, goes out and plays. And it is a lot of help. And I would appreciate to have this help every day but the circumstances are impossible because I can't have this kind of job in South Tirol. (...) My father goes shopping (...). (And) walks a lot because of the dog; he brings the dog with him. And then since Antonio is a bit older, he also takes Antonio when he walks the dog, they watch buses and trams. (Chiara, Italian, 30 yrs old, Medical Consultant, single mother of 2 yrs old Antonio)*

Particular personal circumstances as well as structural constraints such as the unaffordable cost of childcare in Switzerland and employment restrictions made grandparents key agents in both women's households. The behaviour of the carers in the above quotations reassembles that of the 'flying grandmother' described by Baldassar and Merla (2014, p.242), a carer who dislikes travel but remains committed to care for her grandchildren on a regular basis as 'a natural and expected response to the transnational circumstances'. Yet, despite the challenges, grandparents showed tireless efforts in providing childcare and became extensively mobile. Gössling et al. (2018) in their theoretical paper noted that there are further opportunities for the tourism and travel industries to capitalise on feelings of loneliness and connectedness through advertising campaigns. As demonstrated in this paper, the need for transnational care arrangements presents yet another opportunity.

As signalled by Chiara, gender differences in the types of care provided could be observed: men were more likely to provide support for maintenance and repairs or walking the dog, while women more likely to deliver childcare, nursing and housework help. Such types of help provided by women are pictured in both

migration and tourism scholarship where the caring obligation is portrayed as “a given”, an unquestionable task that women must perform (Henderson & Allen, 1991; Pustułka & Ślusarczyk, 2016). Typically single women were recipients of support provided by their fathers at the very first stage of the migration experience. After arrival, any DIY tasks such as, installing electronic equipment, putting up shelves or purchasing household items and other tasks were often performed by fathers:

*My dad, he likes going to Ikea and fixing things for me. When they came over for the first time, it was after a couple of days I moved to my permanent place. Well, most of the things were done by the company relocating me but we still did a lot of things for the house, like fixing and making holes in the walls (Sofia, Greek, Manager, 36 yrs old, single)*

For working mothers, the presence of visitor-carers was an opportunity to catch up with work-related issues or do some home maintenance. In essence, caring visits give evidence of the intergenerational bonds despite the challenges that physical distance produces (Capistrano & Weaver, 2017). Occasionally, however, parents seemed to take control over their children’s new lives as illustrated by Georgia:

*In the morning before I wake up she starts cooking and making pitas, and then cooking for lunch. Yes, that is nice. And she is like: ‘what can I do for you in the house? (...) You are working and I’m sitting all day’. I think Greek mothers never believe that children grow up. And she is like: ‘your brother enjoys that’. Yeah, maybe because he is a man and he enjoys that but I feel really bad, that I do nothing and my mother who is 60 years old, cleans up my house when I’m at work. (...) And when she is there, I have to remove everything in the kitchen, and she always organises all the things her way. (...) It is nice, that they are so caring. (Georgia, Greek, Dentist, 33 yrs old, single)*

After arrival in Basel, Georgia’s mother quickly rearranges her daughter’s personal sphere and adapts to her own needs and habits, mirroring her own home space. This is in sharp contrast to the Spanish-born Mariana’s mother’s behaviour (as will be seen in the next section); a courteous, respectful and tactful visitor. Yet, the actions of the Greek mother are explained by cultural norms as well as the familiarity with her daughter’s space as a result of an unplanned emergency visit to provide personal care and nursing for Georgia when she suffered from a stroke. Georgia may be critical towards gendered family roles, yet she accepts them. ‘Crisis care’ (Baldassar & Merla, 2014), hands-on care support during her illness, resulted in increased trust on the one hand, and lost privacy on the other. The provision of vital support by her parents during a health crisis only became an arena for continued controlling over the life of their daughter. Rather than leading to an increased trust among Georgia and her parents, the emergency visit reinforced traditional patterns. Additional cultural norms also feature in Georgia’s observations on the gendered indulgence of her brother, now living in Germany, regarding their mother’s domestic contribution to cooking and cleaning for her adult children, now in their thirties.

Transnational caregiving is increasingly a key motivation for international mobility (Capistrano & Weaver, 2017). Its extent can vary; from ‘crisis care’ calls or occasional visits through regular frequent contributions

to both childcare and adult support, which may cause friction and result in loss of privacy. However, apart from supporting family life management, caring practices create spaces of intimacy. The women renew caring roles of mothering/motherhood, grand-parenting/parenthood, sibling and friendship relations where a new sense of trust is being built.

*An identity based transformative social practice of the interplay of sociality/tourism/mobility*

The last section focuses on an existential pathway to empowerment and self-confidence that hosting offers. The notion of existential authenticity and ‘*the tourist quest for inter-personal authenticity*’ was first noted by Wang (1999, p. 365) pointing to the reinforcement of family ties which tourism may lead to. Hosting though is an existential pathway to self-validation and self-respect through the creation of social interactions that enhance confidence, autonomy and independence of the migrant host. This is categorised as an *identity based transformative social practice of the interplay of sociality/tourism/mobility*. Through the practice of hosting, the identities of hosts are reconfigured; women gain respect, autonomy and independence.

In almost all the women’s narratives, hosting guests from the homeland was contrasted with performing return visits. Hence, returning home involves travelling to multiple locations, and women in particular are subjected to the pressure of visiting many relatives which is demanding and draining (Pustułka & Ślusarczyk, 2016). Hosting guests on the other hand, allowed undivided attention and an opportunity to host family and friends. For Eleni, who originally comes from a city in the Peloponnese/Greece, but has friends and other family members living in distant Athens, return visits were described as hugely stressful, tiring and required a lot of pre-planning. A solution for her to satisfy family obligations and maintain relations with others was inviting them to her new destination:

*My friends say: ‘oh you don’t come to visit us when you are in Greece’, so I say to them: ‘if you really want to see me, come to Basel’. Because when they come to Basel, I feel these are the only people here and we can spend the time together. I enjoy it more having them here rather than taking two hours to travel and seeing them in Greece. (Eleni, Greek, Researcher, 41 yrs old, Greek partner)*

As opposed to short meetings over coffee to briefly ‘catch-up’ in the home destination, visits to the women offer an opportunity to participate in the migrant’s new life and renew the relationships. Urry (2002) reminds us that these intense moments of quality time of co-presence allow sustaining social relations through geographical distances. Marta does not remember particular venues or sites while hosting her visitors from Poland, all she recalls are ‘meaningful conversations’:

*What I remember is conversations, these very cool conversations. Well, here, in Basel, somehow these are different. Or never-ending cooking, sitting somewhere in the park. And these talks on various topics, simply because with people who have known me longer, you speak differently. (Marta, Polish, Architect, 39 yrs old, Swiss partner and 2 children)*

In the narratives of Eleni and Marta, hosting *enables* migrant women to reconnect with significant others left behind, reminiscing about the past using a shared cultural language and renewing long-term relations. Time is key here; being able to devote sufficient time in order to engage in genuine and meaningful conversations and perform togetherness, an outcome achieved only by physical face-to-face co-presence which allows one to note the body language and sense people directly (Urry, 2002). Some places – cafes or parks – are seen as particularly ambient in creating the conditions for face-to-face moments (Larsen et al., 2007). Such meaningful interactions also aid identification processes which in a state of migrancy are often fragile and fragmented.

Mother-daughter bonding was another practice that emerged from hosting visits. Respondents, Maeve and Shannon, both coming from large Irish families, celebrated the closeness and privacy during their mothers' visits in Basel while their boyfriends were away. The particular form of intimacy; not 'sharing' their mother with other siblings was what both women stressed. A woman-to-woman time was essential for bonding. This is a theme present in a niche women market; *girlfriend getaways (GGA)* which leads to their freedom from social structures and gendered expectations, providing spaces for renewal of relations or adaptation to life stage transitions (Berdychevsky, Gibson, & Bell, 2013). Associated with that, hosting and sightseeing afforded an opportunity to gain parental respect. For Maeve, a young professional, hosting her mother, gave her the pleasure of consuming tourism in multiple places, eating out and buying gifts for her special guest:

*I wanted to show her lots. And she was a teacher, she didn't have much money. So she loved that I was able to keep buying her stuff. That was such a change for her. I was like a grown up. And I think she liked that. We did so much stuff. We went to Strasbourg for a day, Colmar for a day, Freiburg for a day, went to Zurich, went to Bern, it was all in one week.*

By turning her mother into a tourism consumer, visiting multiple European destinations in a week, Maeve saw herself in a new role; empowered, caring and being a financially independent 'adult' who can afford touring, dining and purchasing souvenirs. Separately, evidence of a substantial expenditure in VFR travel is also noted (Backer, 2007). Mariana, a mother of two, also gained her mother's respect, which she noticed by reflecting on her mother's behaviour during her regular visits:

*And my mother would come in winter and summer, and my dad would come with her once. (...) I like it. Because it is the only moment when my mom is really relaxed. Because I have so many other sisters and a brother, and she takes care of everything; cleaning, shopping, finances, everything in the house. And she comes here, she is very respectful. She knows it is my place and not her place. And she lets me cook. She does not try to take over the house. And when she comes here, she comes to visit me. (Mariana, Spanish, Architect, 33 yrs old mother of two, Belgian partner)*

Mariana realised that her home in a different country became a place of escape and relaxation for her mother – emphasising the significance of woman-to-woman holiday time. For the mother, visiting her daughter was therapeutic, reflecting a ‘mental break’, a pause from multiple caring duties (Berdychevsky et al., 2013).

Becoming a mother was a symbolic moment which had a significant impact on the changing nature of the parent-woman and sometimes sibling-woman relationships. Italian-born Chiara analysed her new role as a mother. Although her father continues to actively persuade her to return to Italy by sending her regular job adverts via email, she now feels freed and detached from her parents’ control. This echoes other women narratives portrayed in a study by Christou & Michail (2015) who feel in complete control of their life decisions, that they can be (single) mothers and have a career abroad.

The act of hosting, entertaining and feeding visitors from the homeland in their private homes enables mobile women to reconfigure their identities; to empower, gain parental respect and self-validate their mobility choices. Hosting practices are an exemplification of gendered corporeality as the duties of receiving, guiding, entertaining and feeding visitors are performed largely on their own. Women feel responsible for acting as full time hosts. In a different social context the women strengthen their sense of social identity and self-validate their values.

## CONCLUSION: Reflections and Further Research on the Tyranny and Transformative Potential of Hosting as Social Practice

This study contributes to the literature on VFR hosting (e.g. McKercher, 1996; Backer, 2007; Schänzel et al., 2014) and more broadly to the gender tourism inquiry (Figuroa-Domecq et al., 2015), using empirical data from twenty in-depth interviews conducted with highly skilled professional mobile women in the Swiss city of Basel. *Culture*, *intimacy* and *identity* are pathways to transformative social practices among hosts and guests. Women are drivers of social change: they are not just mobile professionals, they also have agency and learn through personal interactions and through their social surroundings. While research on solo women travellers (e.g. Wilson & Harris, 2006) emphasised a feeling of autonomy, independence and self-empowerment as reasons for their journeys, mobile women are able to achieve a similar sense of liberation as hosts and tourists in their new destinations. Hosting becomes a space of transformational potential; through social practice women learn and alter their behaviour.

Firstly, *culture* is seen as a pathway to transformative social practices, where individuals transform their previously fixed behaviours in different transnational contexts. Women transmitted local knowledge by



customising trips to meet their guests' various needs and interests as well as engage in cultural transformation. Visits from the homeland leading to tourism activities turned mobile women into hosts, tourists and tourist-agents – confirming the significance of tourism for women as a vehicle for empowerment (Jordan & Gibson, 2005). While hosting most of the time was equated with extraordinary and meaningful experiences, occasionally, it caused inter/intragenerational friction and triggered reflections on the strengths of personal and family relationships. While the tourism environment has the potential for (re)creating authentic interpersonal dynamics (Wang, 1999; Berdychevsky et al., 2013), it leads to redefining personal relations, resulting in both desired and disappointing outcomes.

Secondly, *caring* practices extend beyond practices typically supporting family life management – they also create spaces of intimacy. The women renew their parental roles and friendships where a new sense of trust is being built; this is a socially transformative practice which is learnt through hosting practice – taking place not in a vacuum, but in a specific context. Transnational care arrangements, a theme not yet developed in VFR empirical studies (Janta et al., 2015), is increasingly a motivation for international mobility. Care arrangements foster the need for intensive mobility, despite the physical effort, ageing and competing commitments. On the one hand, caregiving as a VFR motive leads to an increased trust; it has the potential to reinforce the intergenerational bonds despite the challenges that physical distance produces (Capistrano & Weaver, 2017). On the other hand, it leads to lost privacy; inability to escape old cultural norms. Yet, gendered roles seem to be traditionally divided among visitors; with women providing childcare support and nursing and men offering more manual/ technical provision.

Finally, hosting turned out to be an influential tool to empowerment and self-confidence through which women gain respect, autonomy and independence. The women in a different social context strengthened their sense of social identity and self-validated their values. Hosting becomes a practice of social *identity*, self-respect, not just as highly-skilled professionals, but also as hosts. In particular for young, now financially independent women, the act of hosting, touring and entertaining visitors from the homeland can result in pride and a reinforcement of their mobility choices. The practice of hosting guests from the homeland is a transformational experience to the same extent that women's independent travel as well as women-to-women time afforded through travel leads to personal transformation (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Berdychevsky et al., 2013). Hosting in their new destinations enables women to reconnect with significant others and redefine their relations. Face-to-face bodily co-presence with visitors from home creates conditions for genuine and meaningful interactions (Urry, 2002). Above all, women seem to have performed hosting duties largely on their own, feeling responsible for acting as full time hosts for their significant others.

This is the first study that analyses VFR hosting through the experiences of highly-skilled mobile professionals, contributing to tourism gender research. Women are not just carers, providing hospitality; they are making a difference, producing new pathways of learning for their guests as well as for themselves, through self-learning, self-validation and reflexivity. This is an understanding that tourism studies can contribute knowledge to policy makers and society, about the roles that women can take as hosts and the roles that can change and transform those who are receiving hospitality. Additionally, hosting creates an intercultural dialogue, in an era where European identity is being shadowed with Brexit, a rise of right-wing conservative moods in Eastern Europe as well as threats to security. Mobile women have the potential of acting as ambassadors, welcoming people and increasing the visibility of the countries they reside in thus strengthening intercultural dialogue, tolerance and respect for diversity.

This research focused on those occupying privileged positions; elite women employed in well-paid jobs, with material means to host their visitors. Of course, migrant women in other less non-elite occupations are likely to have very different experiences of hosting – particularly in the city and country of our fieldwork that cannot be considered as a budget destination. There are three other areas which merit further discussion. Firstly, future research is needed based on an intersectionality driven approach to research; incorporating class, race, gender, generation, ability and age, as analytical signifiers – a neglected and potentially fruitful area for tourism researchers. Secondly, new avenues that can be discussed are that of linking intersectionality with embodiment: affect and body studies. Thirdly, a research design that includes studying a fuller setting, including participants' partners and visitors, would provide additional layers of family dynamics in the family context, portraying a more nuanced picture of family relations.

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