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Transnational Grandparenting: The Emotional Impact of Missing Defining Moments

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of global emigration on the relationships between South African grandparents and their grandchildren born abroad. This study adopts a qualitative approach to examine the emotional challenges of maintaining meaningful connections when physical distance limits grandparents' ability to be present for cultural rituals or key life events. The discussion of the findings is organised into three key phases of grandparenting, revealing a recurring theme of missing out on important milestones. The findings indicate that geographical separation creates significant barriers to sustaining emotional closeness, particularly during the early years of a grandchild's life. While modern communication technologies help families to maintain contact, they cannot fully replace the relational depth of face-to-face interactions. Many grandparents struggle to create the same level of intimacy and presence but have adapted by employing long-distance bonding strategies and leveraging virtual tools to remain actively involved in their grandchildren's lives despite the physical distance.

Keywords: emigration; grandparenting; intergenerational relationships; South Africa, transnational

Introduction

As families become increasingly dispersed globally, it is common for grandparents and grandchildren to be separated by vast geographical distances (Ivan & Hebblethwaite, 2016). The birth of a grandchild is a life-altering milestone. However, for those whose adult children have emigrated, it is often accompanied by complex challenges and an undercurrent of emotional loss. Nesteruk and Marks (2009) state that emigration frequently disrupts family connections, weakens intergenerational bonds, and hinders the transmission of cultural heritage.

This research aims to explore how distance redefines the role of grandparents in South African families, specifically in the context of transitioning to transnational grandparenting. It further investigates how grandparents adapt their roles at various stages of their grandchildren's lives

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when those grandchildren are born abroad. The study examines how geographical separation shapes and transforms traditional grandparenting dynamics.

The discussion of the findings is organised into three key phases of grandparenting: the anticipation of the role before the birth, the experiences surrounding the birth event, and the ongoing development of the grandparent-grandchild relationship. A recurring theme that emerges from the participants' accounts is the emotional challenge of maintaining a connection despite the physical distance. The absence during key life events compels grandparents to adopt creative approaches to foster and sustain bonds with their grandchildren (Nedelcu, 2017).

This study highlights the emotional and practical efforts required to preserve familial connections across geographical distances. Grandparents employ a range of strategies, including using virtual communication platforms, scheduling periodic in-person visits, and relying on the active involvement of parents to facilitate contact. By examining these adaptive practices, this research offers valuable insights into the lived realities and relational complexities of grandparenting in a globalised, transnational context.

Literature Review

The Role of Grandparents in Modern Society

The traditional African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child”, expresses the collective nature of child-rearing across cultures. Parenthood is not an isolated endeavour but a dynamic process that involves significant intra- and interpersonal adjustments in the family system. From an evolutionary perspective, human infants require prolonged care, which is often supported through cooperative caregiving involving extended family, particularly grandparents (Sear, 2016).

Grandmothers' contributions extend beyond direct childcare to include emotional and informational support, which can be critical for mothers and infants during the perinatal period (Scelza & Hinde, 2019). The involvement of grandmothers has been linked to improved maternal mental health, energy balance, and nutritional outcomes in infants, reinforcing the anthropological perspective that grandmothers are integral to human reproductive success (Aubel, 2021).

In modern families, grandparents remain vital sources of emotional, practical, and sometimes financial support. Many consider their presence in their grandchildren's lives as their most meaningful contribution, reinforcing family continuity (Dessen, 2013). Social and demographic changes, including dual-income households and shifting family structures, have led to a greater reliance on grandparents (Hayslip & Smith, 2013). However, geographical separation due to emigration has challenged traditional roles, prompting adaptations through virtual connections and long-distance caregiving strategies.

Transnational Grandparenting

Emigration and mobility are embedded in the South African economic and socio-political landscape (Bennett et al., 2014). Statistical data reflect a consistent increase in emigration over the past two decades. In 2000, approximately 501,600 South African citizens were living abroad. In 2024, the number approached one million, and it is projected that about 1.6% of



the country's 63 million population will be residing abroad in 2025 (Statistics South Africa, 2024). The data show a significant number of South African communities abroad, with 247,336 people residing in the United Kingdom, 199,690 in Australia, 117,321 in the United States, 73,846 in New Zealand, and 48,093 in Canada (Crouth, 2024).

Emigration is often portrayed as an individual pursuit of better opportunities in a distant country. Motivated by factors such as employment prospects, safety concerns, and the desire for an improved quality of life, this phenomenon has become widespread (Crush et al., 2005). However, emigration affects not only those who leave but also the loved ones they leave behind (Falicov, 2005). As a result, emigration reshapes family dynamics across generations, introducing new complexities in relationships and emotional distances.

As families are spreading across multiple time zones, what once were seamless exchanges now require careful planning and coordination (Crouth, 2024). Since most emigrants are young people, the parents who remain behind have to endure the emotional toll of separation, along with financial and bureaucratic challenges, including high visa fees, mandatory health insurance, and medical exams, all of which strain transnational relationships (Ferreira, 2025).

Transnational relationships refer to those formed between individuals located in different national spaces; that is, relationships that are built beyond geographical borders (Schuler et al., 2022). Grandparents usually become integral participants in a transnational lifestyle. The challenges of long-distance grandparenting are well-documented (Nedelcu, 2009), emphasising the strain imposed by physical separation and the adaptation required to maintain transnational relationships.

For many grandparents, this represents a profound loss – not just of the daily, tangible interactions with their grandchildren but also of the cherished traditional role they once played in the family. Being unable to engage physically in their grandchildren's lives often gives rise to a profound sense of loss and longing (Marchetti-Mercer, 2017). This shift frequently 'steals' the grandparents' traditional role, leaving those who remain behind mourning not only the physical absence of their grandchildren but also the altered dynamic with their emigrant children.

The loss of a traditional grandparenting role can be understood as an ambiguous loss, "an incomplete and uncertain loss that defies closure" (Boss, 1993, p. 3). Emigration, as Boss (1993) notes, is a systemic and ongoing process rather than a single event. When an adult child emigrates, the parent-child relationship shifts, characterised by physical absence but a continued psychological presence. For those left behind, this unresolved and unacknowledged grief is difficult to process, as it lacks both clear closure and social recognition.

Nurturing Bonds in Transnational Grandparenting

Emigration disrupts regular face-to-face interactions, which limits opportunities for spontaneous affection, shared experiences, and the transmission of cultural values across generations (King & Vullnetari, 2006). In response, digital technologies have become vital tools for maintaining intergenerational relationships (Baldassar, 2008). Video calls, messaging apps, and social media allow grandparents to remain involved in their grandchildren's lives despite geographic separation.

Maintaining a virtual presence requires emotional effort and adaptability from grandparents, who often encounter challenges such as time zone differences, technological barriers, and gaps in digital literacy. These challenges have led to what Ferreira and Carbonatto (2023) refer to as “digital grandparenting”, a situation in which interactions are limited to virtual contact. While digital tools offer emotional connection, they cannot replace the depth of in-person interactions (Wilding & Baldassar, 2018). Physical visits remain vital for “emotional refuelling”, allowing grandparents to reconnect, build relationships, and offer hands-on support (Marchetti-Mercer et al., 2021).

Even simple digital tasks, like joining a video call or sending a photo, can cause anxiety for grandparents, especially those who fear pressing the wrong button or damaging a device. Sensory challenges, such as hearing or vision impairments, further complicate interactions, making it more difficult to follow conversations or interpret facial expressions. Many grandparents report feeling emotionally disconnected during video calls, particularly when their young grandchildren are restless or distracted. The absence of physical closeness and spontaneous affection, which are central to grandparenting, can make virtual encounters feel hollow (Ivan & Hebblethwaite, 2016).

Successful digital engagement requires access to appropriate equipment and the acquisition of digital skills – both of which pose significant barriers for many older adults. In digital grandparenting, a range of communication tools, from video calls to simple phone conversations, helps maintain relationships when in-person visits are not possible. Although Media Richness Theory suggests that richer media should enhance emotional connections, research indicates that video calls often fall short. In contrast, simpler tools such as telephones often meet emotional needs more effectively because they are familiar and easy to use (Döring et al., 2024; Peek et al., 2014).

Meaningful digital communication depends not only on the medium being used but also on the confidence with which it is used. Some grandparents express discomfort with advanced technologies, such as augmented reality or social robots, describing them as cold or alienating. Rather than enhancing connection, these tools may intensify loneliness if they are not designed with empathy and simplicity in mind. In the context of digital grandparenting, success is measured by technological sophistication, emotional accessibility, ease of use, and a sense of shared presence despite the distance (Döring et al., 2024).

Some transnational grandparents, especially grandmothers, engage in regular travel to provide short- or long-term childcare; a pattern described as “Generation 0 of migration” (Nedelcu, 2009) or “transnational flying grandparents” (Treas & Mazumdar, 2004). During key developmental stages, the physical presence of grandparents strengthens the emotional bonds with their grandchildren and provides support to their adult children’s households. These caregiving roles contribute significantly to intergenerational connection and cross-border family stability (De Silva, 2020).

The extent of grandparental involvement is often influenced by the parents who act as facilitators or gatekeepers for communication and access (Arber & Timonen, 2012; Baldassar et al., 2007). Positive relationships between parents and grandparents enhance engagement, while strained dynamics can limit interaction.



Research Design

This research focuses particularly on how a grandchild's birth location influences the grandparenting role, highlighting the unique challenges and adaptations that arise in transnational family structures. Participants' reflections on their subjective experiences as grandparents consistently emphasise the need to examine the unique dynamics and significance of transnational grandparenting, particularly when grandchildren are born abroad. This research, therefore, investigates transnational grandparenting in the South African context, addressing the following research questions:

- How does the geographical birth location of a grandchild influence the grandparenting role in transnational families?
- How do transnational grandparents adapt their role across different stages of their grandchildren's lives, specifically when those grandchildren are born abroad?
- How do transnational grandparents sustain attachment bonds with grandchildren born abroad?

Background

This research contributes to a broader initiative that explores the experiences of South African grandparents whose adult children and grandchildren have emigrated. Drawing on insights from multiple studies conducted by the researcher over the past 18 years (summarised in Table 1), this work explores how transnational grandparenting dynamics are shaped by geographical separation.

Table 1. Research projects

Project	Purpose
Project 1 2015	The researcher's PhD study focused on transnational family dynamics following emigration (2015). Four key themes were identified: emigration of the adult child, emigration of the grandchild, intergenerational relationships, and transnational communication.
Project 2 2020	Theme 1: Emigration of the adult child (Ferreira & Carbonatto, 2020). This qualitative phenomenological study explored and described the reasons for the emigration of South African adult children.
Project 3 2021	Theme 2: Intergenerational relationships (Ferreira & Carbonatto, 2023). Using open-ended interviews, this qualitative study used thematic analysis to explore the experiences of South African grandparents as they transition into their role as transnational grandparents.
Project 4 2024	Theme 3: Transnational communication (Ferreira, 2025). The study examined the central role of visits in sustaining familial bonds and the emotional, logistical, and financial challenges that complicate these encounters.

Methods

Both the original and current studies employed a qualitative research design. Unstructured face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants during the original study published

in 2015. To address the evolving focus on grandchildren born abroad, the current study incorporated additional qualitative data collection methods. Participants were invited to either provide written responses to open-ended survey questions (Braun et al., 2021) or to participate in audio-recorded, semi-structured online interviews. To ensure credibility, this study incorporated verbatim excerpts from participants' narratives, as recommended by Polit and Beck (2016). Data analysis adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis.

Participants

The inclusion criteria for participants specified that they had to be South African citizens of any race, culture, religion, or gender, residing in South Africa, and aged between 50 and 85 years. Participants were required to be fluent in English and to have adult children who had emigrated and lived abroad for a minimum of one year. For the ongoing research, additional participants were recruited, with the new requirement that they must have grandchildren who were born abroad.

This study included a total of 44 participants, consisting of eight males and 36 females, with an average age of 67 years. The majority were Afrikaans-speaking South African grandparents who were fluent in English, enabling them to comfortably engage in interviews conducted in either language. Notably, 28 participants had grandchildren who were born abroad, highlighting the transnational aspect of their roles as grandparents from the outset. The children of these participants primarily migrated to Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and various European countries. Among these participants, 14 reported having multiple children who had emigrated. Of those 14 families, six indicated that all siblings had relocated to the same country, suggesting a trend of sibling co-migration. In contrast, eight participants reported that their children who emigrated settled in different countries, reflecting a more diverse emigration pattern within the same family unit.

Ethical Considerations

The University of Pretoria Ethics Committee renewed the ethical approval for the ongoing research. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants had the option to withdraw at any stage. Each participant signed a voluntary consent form that provided details about the study, granted permission to participate, consented to the audio recording of interviews, allowed for the use of direct quotations, and ensured the protection of their identities. Confidentiality was ensured by assigning pseudonyms to all participants, which are used throughout this article. Confidentiality was integral to the research process and was upheld consistently.

Limitations of the Study

This study explores the under-examined experiences of South African grandparents with grandchildren who live abroad. Given the limited literature specific to this context, insights were drawn from related research conducted in other cultural and geographical settings, which may not fully reflect the unique South African experience. While the small sample size aligned with the qualitative focus on depth, it inherently limited the generalisability of the results, emphasising the value of rich, detailed narratives over broad representations.



Discussion and Analysis of the Results

This section discusses the key themes that emerged from a qualitative study on the lived experiences of South African transnational grandparents. Their narratives reveal how the birth of grandchildren abroad reshapes traditional perceptions of the role of grandparents. Place of birth emerged as a pivotal factor, influencing both the practical involvement of grandparents and the ways in which emotional bonds are formed and maintained.

A central theme in the findings is the ongoing adaptation of transnational grandparents to their grandchildren's developmental stages. This evolving role is influenced by technological advancements, the child's age, and the changing family routines and cultural contexts. Grandparents employ various strategies to foster and sustain attachment with their grandchildren born abroad, despite limited physical proximity. Although the primary focus of this study was on grandchildren born abroad, occasional comparisons with grandchildren born in South Africa offered valuable contrasts. Examining both scenarios provided valuable insights into how geographical birthplace influences the way grandparents fulfil their roles.

Role of Grandparents as Perceived by Participants

Grandparents play multifaceted roles in their grandchildren's lives, including providing care, offering emotional support, and passing down family values. They are increasingly being acknowledged as essential figures in modern family systems (Buchanan & Rotkirch, 2018), with their greatest contributions often found in emotional presence and active engagement (Dessen, 2013). In this study, South African grandparents emphasised their importance in maintaining intergenerational connections. Lilla reflected:

I believe that grandparents play an important role in the lives of their grandchildren. Parents are often so busy trying to make ends meet, and this is where grandparents can step in. We can teach our grandchildren rhymes and songs, introduce them to family traditions, and share stories about things their mother or father did when they were young. Oupa and Ouma² can involve the grandchildren in board games, puzzles, and even teach them crafts or woodworking. Because we are so far away, we cannot really be caregivers, but besides what I mentioned above, we can teach them about their parents' country of origin.

This aligns with the findings of Davies et al. (2002), who identified roles such as sharing family history, offering emotional support, and teaching values. Grandparents who live nearby often engage in daily caregiving, help with school runs, and provide direct emotional support. In contrast, those separated by distance must adapt their roles. Jolana adds:

... I would say ... as far as I am concerned, the role of a grannie is not that of an educator, it is not her duty or the duty of the grandpa to educate. They just must be ... and by being you are educating. But there the educational process is covert, not deliberate.

For many, caring for grandchildren holds deep emotional meaning. It allows grandparents to cultivate special bonds and define their identity, especially as grandmothers (Ferreira, 2015). Emigration disrupts this process, often resulting in feelings of loss and longing. However, participants expressed a strong desire to remain involved, drawing purpose from their grandparenting role.

² *Ouma* and *Oupa* are the Afrikaans terms for Grandmother and Grandfather, respectively.

Grandparents living abroad encounter barriers such as distance, cultural differences, and shifting family dynamics – all of which influence their level of involvement (Sousa & Bertolo, 2023). Notably, the grandchild's place of birth emerged as a key factor shaping emotional bonds and relational patterns, with grandparents reporting varying levels of connection based on whether the child was born in South Africa or abroad.

Grandchildren Born in South Africa Before Emigration

When grandchildren are born in their grandparents' home country, the grandparents typically assume a traditional, hands-on role early in the child's life. This role involves caring for the child directly, attending milestones, engaging in daily routines, and forming deep emotional bonds through shared experiences. Jane, an active 65-year-old grandmother, described her extensive involvement with her grandchildren before they emigrated:

So, I was incredibly involved with them I took them everywhere and sometimes I took the children to parties when "M" had to work. Many, many times we took them to sports things when my children could not take them. We read, let's say, about birds. We always made things, or we baked cookies, or we made or built little things or we went somewhere for the morning, or I took them to the museum.

Such proximity facilitates spontaneous interaction and fosters intergenerational continuity. However, when grandchildren emigrate, the previously established bonds intensify the emotional impact of separation. Annelise reflected on this experience, describing a sentiment echoed by other participants that it felt somewhat 'easier' when a grandchild was born overseas.

I make a conscious effort with my grandchildren, I want to build memories. I want them to miss me when I am gone, to remember that Ouma rolled on the lawn with them, played, and laughed, these moments are everything. When your grandchild is born here, you are there from the start you know them from birth, you see them every day, you share in everything. And then, when they leave, the pain is ... It feels like something is being torn away. That is why, I think it is easier if they are born there.

The emotional toll of separation can be profound, especially when a close bond has already been established. Anne echoed similar sentiments, describing the farewell at the airport as an emotionally wrenching experience:

I had an unbelievably close relationship with that little girl ... We were literally torn apart at the airport when she left.

These accounts highlight how pre-established bonds make subsequent separation particularly painful, requiring significant emotional adjustment to navigate the new long-distance dynamic.

Grandchildren Born Abroad

In contrast, when grandchildren are born abroad, the role of being a grandparent begins from a distance. Establishing the relationship often relies on digital communication and occasional visits – both of which are shaped by logistical, financial, and visa-related hurdles. Caroline noted the challenge of forming a connection without a physical presence:

Like me, many grandmothers have shared that when their young grandchildren are born abroad, they feel a deep sense of disconnection; they don't know their grandchildren, and their grandchildren don't know them.



For these grandparents, the absence of shared physical experiences caused by geographical distance challenges the building of relationships during the formative stages of a child's life. Grandparents observed that their involvement with grandchildren living abroad was not as substantial as with those in South Africa. Physical distance disrupts bonding rhythms because it creates the emotional challenge of not being able to see or hold their grandchild during formative moments, intensifying the sense of distance. Mia noted:

I think our role is much smaller for the grandchildren overseas compared to the grandchildren in South Africa because we are much less involved in their activities and events.

These findings align with those of Ellis (2020), who emphasises that geographical proximity profoundly shapes grandparent-grandchild relationships. Grandparents who live closer to their grandchildren can maintain strong connections through frequent visits and spontaneous interactions, yielding psychological benefits for both generations.

In the discussion that follows, the researcher focuses on the experiences of grandparents whose grandchildren were born abroad.

The Phases of Grandparenting in a Transnational Context

The stages of anticipating a grandchild's birth, embracing new beginnings, and nurturing emotional bonds are universal to grandparenting, but the geographical distance separating transnational families alters how these phases unfold. The traditional role of grandparents is being redefined as they discover new ways to connect and contribute across borders. The challenge lies not in the phases themselves, but in how they are approached when separated by distance.

Phase 1: Anticipating the Grandparenting Role Before the Birth

The anticipation of a grandchild's birth abroad evokes mixed emotions for grandparents. While the news brings joy and excitement, these feelings are often tempered by a deep sense of longing and sadness. Unlike local births, geographical separation creates an emotional void, making it challenging to fully engage in the journey to grandparenthood. The reality of nurturing relationships across borders forces grandparents to redefine their roles, balancing anticipation with the emotional complexities of distance (Schuler et al., 2022). Denise captured this emotional duality upon learning of her daughter's pregnancy:

I jump up and down. I'm standing here dancing and I jump and I cry and I am glad that I am sad and I'm all of these things at once. Sad in the sense that ... I want to be there. I want to go through every phase with her. I want to see how her little body grows. That little guy ... in London, will never be able to say: [whispers] Ouma's coming. It will be once a year.

The inability to be physically present for key life events is a recurring theme in the experiences of transnational grandparents. The first missed milestone – whether it is a birth, wedding, or family gathering – is often deeply painful. Over time, this absence becomes a continual source of grief as a pattern of loss emerges. Tania described how cumulative losses shaped her perspective:

... we were kept up to date the whole time before and after the baby shower through photos and videos, and we still felt like we were part of it. But my daughter also got married during Covid in 2020, and we couldn't attend the wedding either. That was heartbreaking, something everyone had looked forward to for so long. I

think after that, missing a baby shower was just another thing that was lost, and in the end, it was simply accepted ...

Pregnancy is a period that traditionally strengthens family bonds, particularly the relationship between mothers and daughters (Shereen et al., 2015). The shared anticipation, physical closeness, and tangible interactions – such as touching the growing belly, attending medical appointments, and witnessing physical changes – solidify emotional connections. However, emigration disrupts these experiences, making milestones feel distant and intangible.

Beth, a participant, described her daughter's pregnancy abroad as "surreal". She explained that not being able to physically touch her daughter's pregnant belly, a gesture imbued with intimacy and symbolism, made her transition into grandmotherhood feel distant and intangible. She only fully grasped the reality of becoming a grandmother when she physically touched her daughter's belly during a visit. Beth explained that the act of physically touching her daughter's belly was the first time in which the experience felt real.

Family rituals play a crucial role in fostering emotional connections and reinforcing a sense of belonging. Pregnancy and childbirth rituals, such as baby showers, symbolise communal support, celebration, and the marking of life transitions (Ferreira, 2024). However, for transnational grandparents, geographical separation often prevents them from participating in these significant moments, leading to feelings of exclusion, as shared by Sophia:

It broke my heart that I couldn't be a part of it and had to be satisfied with photos. Here in South Africa, I am invited to my friends' grandchildren's baby showers, but I can't attend my own grandchild's. As a result, I sit with tears in my eyes at all the other showers.

Rando (1985) defines a ritual as an activity that symbolically expresses specific emotions and thoughts, either individually or collectively, offering a space for unrestrained emotional expression. When grandchildren are born overseas, it becomes logistically and financially challenging to participate in these meaningful rituals because of time zone differences and travel constraints. Virtual adaptations, such as online baby showers, attempt to bridge this gap but often fall short of fulfilling the need for physical presence. Sue-Ann, a 60-year-old grandmother, described the experience:

The virtual stork tea for my first grandchild was not at all what I envisaged; it was bittersweet ... The silence of physical absence echoed loudly. Each gift being unwrapped and each piece of advice shared was a reminder of the vast distance between us. I longed to touch each Babygro, to share whispers and laughter without delay, to smell the baby powder. I can't help but wish to be with her.

Beyond logistical challenges, geographical separation also shapes how grandparents psychologically prepare for their new roles. Simple, everyday moments, such as feeling the unborn baby kick or planning the nursery, are mediated through screens and phone calls. Sluzki (1979) notes that, in most cultures, migrants rely on private rituals to cope with emotional separation. For grandparents, these rituals offer some solace but rarely replace the comfort of physical proximity. Many try to bridge the gap through creative means, such as sending gifts, making financial contributions, and engaging in virtual events. However, these efforts often encounter obstacles, as Elsa described:

I always showed interest in the pregnancy over the phone, but it wasn't enough. I sent gifts and also transferred money for the virtual stork tea. I could not be present at the virtual tea, due to time difference.



As the reality of becoming a grandparent from afar starts to take shape, it is often in stark contrast to the traditional role they may have imagined. Yvonne shared how this phase involves not just preparing for a new family member but also adapting to the idea of connecting and building relationships through screens rather than through shared physical experiences. Andrea supported this feeling by stating:

I was privileged to attend a baby shower before she was born. It was an honour, but I had to step away repeatedly to hide my tears because I knew what lay ahead, I was going to be a long-distance, phone-screen grandmother.

Emigration complicates intergenerational patterns of attachment, which are crucial for both the pregnant woman's transition into motherhood and the grandmother's adjustment to her new role. This disruption can create gaps in the emotional support system, making it difficult for both individuals to adapt to their evolving identities.

This phenomenon aligns closely with Boss's (1999) concept of ambiguous loss, which is described as a loss that lacks clarity or closure. For transnational grandparents, this loss begins with the announcement of pregnancy. They are emotionally present yet physically absent, straddling the boundary between connection and separation. Participants recognised their grandchild's existence but were unable to fully participate in the pregnancy, birth, and early bonding. This contrast between 'what could have been' and their lived reality fosters a mourning for the loss of closeness that they cannot achieve, even as they strive to maintain a connection from afar.

Phase 2: The Birth: New Beginnings Across the Distance

The birth of a grandchild is a pivotal moment in family life, symbolising the continuation of the lineage and creating emotional connections. For many families, this milestone naturally mobilises grandparents to assist, whether by supporting the mother in the first weeks after childbirth or stepping in to care for the child when the mother returns to work or study (Wyss & Nedelcu, 2018). Reinette reflected on her experiences of being present immediately after the birth, stating:

I was very privileged to be there with our grandchild's birth. As grandfather and grandmother now, we wanted to be of assistance, and "M" naturally, had very little sleep during that period. First baby, breastfeeding, learning all the little things. We then said, "Listen, go lie down for a bit, the little one has just been fed, and we will hold him with us".

Not all grandparents, however, have the opportunity to witness the birth of their grandchildren or spend extended time with them in person. Many participants, including one individual, expressed a desire to be present for the birth but were unable to do so due to financial constraints. Others reported managing only a brief visit months after the birth; however, even these short stays were cherished. Nadene described her visit:

I went to visit when the baby was two months old and stayed for a month. The visit was wonderful and precious, and the bond with the grandchild was strengthened. I spent a lot of time with the baby, and now he doesn't feel like a stranger on FaceTime or in photos.

Participants noted that the ability to travel and provide hands-on care and emotional support depends on multiple factors, including financial stability, physical health, and the willingness and capacity of adult children to accommodate their grandparents. Wyss and Nedelcu (2018)

describe these interdependencies as the “Zero Generation caregiving arrangements”, which hinge on the adult children’s need for childcare and the grandparents’ ability to travel and help. However, this dynamic is often complicated by administrative hurdles, such as visa restrictions, relational tensions (like differing expectations or strained relationships), and individual limitations, including health challenges or financial difficulties. Financial constraints emerged as a significant barrier for the participants (Ferreira, 2025). Beth states the following:

You feel so powerless. You just sit and wonder what’s happening and worry endlessly. You wonder how they are doing. Are they okay? Your hands feel so tied, and you feel so excluded.

The frequency of visits among participants varied significantly, reflecting a spectrum of circumstances and constraints. In addition to airfare, hidden costs such as visa fees, mandatory health insurance, and medical examinations for older travellers can pose substantial obstacles. While some parents were able to visit their emigrant children multiple times, others struggled to afford even a single trip. Participants described these financial burdens as a source of stress, making even a single visit difficult to manage financially. This aligns with findings of Miah and King (2021), who highlight that transnational visits are often a privilege that not all families can attain.

Grandparents who were able to visit during the early days of their grandchild’s life found the experience to be transformative. The physical presence of a grandmother or grandfather provided not only practical help but also critical emotional support. This desire to be present reflects Baldassar’s (2007) assertion that face-to-face support is particularly vital during crises and major life transitions for new parents. The physical presence of grandparents during the perinatal period often strengthens family bonds, reduces parental stress, and enables early grandparent-grandchild attachment. Sandra recounted how her presence during this time brought a sense of calm and reassurance to her daughter’s family:

... my son-in-law also sent me a WhatsApp now to thank me for being there, for supporting them, and he said it was wonderful to see how people need to change when your mom is there, the calmness that she brought, you know. First baby, then you also need your mom.

Transnational grandparenting is characterised by the mobility of grandparents who travel to live with their children and grandchildren abroad, whether for short visits or extended stays. These “seniors on the move” (Treas & Mazumdar, 2004) actively engage in regular back-and-forth travel between their home and host country. A key aspect of this arrangement is the grandparents’ role as child carers, providing support while being physically present with their families (King et al., 2014; Nedelcu, 2009).

While there have been significant discussions about the value that grandparents provide by assisting new parents, it is equally important to recognise the benefits for the grandparents themselves. Being present when a grandchild is born allows grandparents to establish emotional connections right from the start. As Pippa shared:

I landed the day after his birth and was able to visit for three months to help where needed. I do think he remembers my voice, and that it will have meaning later in his life.

This early bonding enhances the grandparent-grandchild relationship by establishing attachments that enrich both their lives and those of their grandchildren, particularly during this crucial period. The physical presence of grandparents instils a sense of familiarity in the newborn, which can positively influence the quality of their relationship in the years to come.



There are varying perspectives regarding the importance of being present at the birth. Some grandparents feel it is not crucial to be there immediately, believing that parents are primarily involved and that the newborn is not yet aware of their presence. Sanette shared:

In my personal opinion, it's not as crucial to be present at the birth. At that stage, the mommy and daddy are very involved, and the newborn isn't aware of grandparents.

This viewpoint emphasises that not all grandparents feel the urgent need to be present, as they prioritise the role of the parents during those initial moments. On the other hand, many grandparents genuinely wish to be involved but face financial, health, and various other limitations. For those who can be present, building early attachments with their grandchildren holds significant value.

Phase 3: Nurturing Emotional Connections After the Birth

Distance compels grandparents to find new ways to bond with their grandchildren (Schuler et al., 2022). While face-to-face contact traditionally sustains close relationships, Baldassar (2008) notes that alternative forms of “presencing”, such as virtual communication, symbolic gestures, and imaginative practices, can reinforce familial ties. Grandparents in this study mirrored these strategies by engaging in video calls, sending gifts, and cherishing photos to nurture emotional connections after the birth of their grandchild.

The two main lifelines that emerged were virtual communication and in-person visits. The quality and frequency of these interactions, often mediated by adult children, play a vital role in nurturing emotional bonds. When travel is restricted due to age, health, or visa constraints, virtual contact becomes essential (Marchetti-Mercer et al., 2021). Many grandparents use video calls to observe their grandchildren's growth (Forghani & Neustaedter, 2014), despite challenges with technology. Regular communication brings emotional benefits, while limited contact is associated with increased depressive symptoms in grandparents (Drew & Silverstein, 2007). The motivation to connect often outweighs digital barriers. Deidre stated the following:

The more we talk and the more he hears my voice, the more he will remember me, even if I'm not physically there. Regular, consistent contact, creative ways to communicate with him and using something familiar that he can associate me with. As he gets older, and learns to communicate, I will try to find a routine so that he knows when Grandma is going to call.

Regular engagement fosters recognition, familiarity, and emotional intimacy, even when experienced through screens. However, some grandparents remain acutely aware of the limitations:

I feel a continuous loss for sure. I feel empty. I envy my girlfriends so much or maybe I'm jealous of them when I see the time they spend with their grandchildren and I can't. Although we do a lot of video calls, I don't feel it's the same. Time on a screen is not the same at all and in my opinion, neither is it quality time. I say again that I do not want a “grandmother or grandfather” to be associated as someone with whom you video call.

Time zone differences, rather than physical distance, were frequently cited as major barriers to meaningful interaction (Cao, 2013). Families must navigate narrow windows of shared availability, often relying on weekends or leisure hours. Andrea explained:

The time difference is 8 hours, which makes it difficult. You don't want to disrupt their morning routine, and later on, the older kids go to school, the baby sleeps, or our son is at work. Our son calls us every evening between 7 and 8 PM our time, because then he's usually finished with dinner. But we try to call over weekends.

Despite these efforts, mismatched daily rhythms remain challenging, and even routine contact cannot fully replace the depth of in-person connection. As Baldassar et al. (2014) note, physical proximity fosters stronger intergenerational bonds. Participants echoed this, expressing that while digital tools help sustain relationships, they lack the warmth and intimacy of being together physically. A participant commented:

The absence of physical contact is extremely important because that is how a grandchild experiences your gentleness, warmth, trust, and love. Video calls feels "far away", cold, and impersonal. A small hand reaching out to a cold screen will not fulfil the child's need or nurture a longing for their grandparent.

In-person visits offer sensory-rich, emotionally resonant experiences. Nico reflected:

For the first few days of the visit, he wanted to sit on our laps all the time. My conclusion: he missed our physical presence, but it's the regular communication that keeps us close between visits.

Scholars such as Marchetti-Mercer (2012) and Mulder and Cooke (2009) have emphasised the irreplaceable role of shared physical experiences in nurturing emotional bonds. While digital tools bridge distance, they may offer only an "illusion of intimacy" (Wilding, 2006), falling short of fulfilling the deep psychological need for face-to-face connection and non-verbal emotional cues.

The Role of the Parents

A key factor in nurturing the attachment between grandparents and grandchildren is the active involvement of parents as facilitators of the relationship (Arber & Timonen, 2012). As Baldassar et al. (2007) observe, parents often act as "gatekeepers", shaping the frequency, quality, and nature of contact. Especially in transnational families, where grandchildren are often too young to maintain relationships independently, grandparents rely on the 'middle generation' to keep them informed and emotionally connected. Some grandparents in this study expressed deep appreciation for the consistent efforts of their children. Anne noted:

My daughter deserves a medal for this. Every morning, she sends photos and videos of Maxie on our family group, which includes my parents (his grandfather and great-grandmother). We continue to be part of his development and that is great.

Similarly, Lucy described the intentional efforts of both parents:

My daughter and son-in-law are both very good at sending me photos and videos regularly ... They both know how much I miss being with my two grandkids, so they keep me updated ... They also phone weekly and encourage the children to be focused on our calls.

However, not all grandparents felt satisfied with how involved their children were. The level of contact and communication often varied based on the parents' personalities, priorities, and life demands. One participant reflected:

In my opinion, it depends a lot on personalities. My daughter is not very good at communicating and staying in touch, especially as family, responsibilities, and the busyness of life have increased.



Some participants stated that parents play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining relationships with their grandchildren. Parents consistently put in effort, even when the circumstances are not ideal. Young children may resist cooperation and may not engage when it is convenient for their parents and grandparents. If parents are not committed, particularly when their children are young, nurturing those bonds can be quite challenging. Sophia shared:

Their role is very important, but it also places pressure on them because they have to make an effort from their side to keep the relationship alive. The grandchild is not always in the mood to sit on their mother's lap or to communicate at that moment.

These varied experiences highlight how the strength of the grandparent-grandchild bond in transnational families is closely tied to parental involvement. Factors such as the frequency of shared updates, the effort involved in scheduling video calls, and the emotional investment in the grandparent's role all significantly shape the quality of the relationship (Vutborg et al., 2010).

Missing Out

Participants frequently voiced the emotional burden of missing important milestones in their grandchildren's lives. Physical distance limits their ability to actively participate in their grandchildren's development. As one participant noted:

One misses out so much on their growth and development. I really wanted to be much more involved, but circumstances didn't allow it. I can't change the circumstances, so I try to make the best of what I have.

This sense of absence can evoke a range of emotions, including longing, sadness, and sometimes frustration. While emigration often offers younger generations better opportunities, it frequently leaves older family members feeling abandoned, resentful, and mourning the loss of close-knit family ties. This dynamic reveals the deep connection between personal grief and broader socio-political dissatisfaction, as the repercussions of emigration resonate far beyond individual families. The reality is that they are not part of each other's everyday lives:

... the grandchildren are growing up without us. That is absolutely unmanageable, that's the nearest to breakdown you get.

Grandparents often experience a loss of their identity as family elders when their children emigrate (Marchetti-Mercer, 2017). This aligns with findings that having a physical presence plays a crucial role in maintaining strong emotional bonds. It underscores the depth of the identity shift that grandparents experience when their traditional roles in the family are disrupted.

Conclusion

This research contributes to a growing body of literature on transnational families by offering insights into the emotional, relational, and practical challenges faced by grandparents in maintaining cross-border connections. It emphasises the resilience of grandparents who strive to remain emotionally close despite physical distance and limited contact.

This study identified three key phases of grandparenting: anticipation before birth, the birth experience, and the gradual development of emotional bonds over time, all experienced in the

context of transnational grandparenting. It explored how South African grandparents adapt their roles to maintain meaningful connections with their grandchildren born abroad.

The findings reveal that geographical separation greatly affects the quality of grandparent-grandchild relationships, especially during the early formative years of a grandchild's life. Emigration disrupts intergenerational dynamics, prompting grandparents to reframe their roles in the family by relying on creativity, persistence, and evolving forms of 'virtual presence' to maintain these connections.

Conducting this research felt akin to flipping through a photo album – one filled with vivid snapshots of joy, connection, and presence, yet interspersed with blank pages. These empty spaces represent the defining moments missed due to distance: birthdays, school events, spontaneous hugs, and the quiet rituals of everyday life. Such absences capture the emotional reality of transnational grandparenting – a reality shaped by love, resilience, and the ache of being far away when presence matters most.

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