

# From Language Brokering to Digital Brokering: Refugee Settlement in a Smartphone Age

Social Media + Society  
April-June 2021: 1–11  
© The Author(s) 2021  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/20563051211012365  
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms  


Shane Worrell 

## Abstract

Many young people in migrant families perform language-brokering tasks for their parents to help them overcome their everyday challenges of communicating in a new language. Such informal brokering is typically the result of younger people being more exposed to, and becoming more familiar with, the dominant language of their new country. This article argues that such brokering has a digital equivalent in a migrant setting, in which transnational family communication increasingly relies on a grasp of the dominant “language” of smartphones and social media. Using data drawn from a study of Karen humanitarian migrants who have settled in Australia, younger migrants are shown to have had a greater exposure to, and familiarity with, digital technology than their parents, leading to significant communicative differences between two generations. Such differences, I explain, have created conditions conducive to the performance of a new type of intergenerational support in a migrant context: “digital” brokering. This is demonstrated through young people helping their parents use smartphones, social media, and video-calling apps to maintain transnational relationships after settlement.

## Keywords

migration, refugee settlement, Karen refugees, smartphones, language brokering, digital brokering, video calling

## Introduction

The 21st century has so far been an age of the “connected migrant” (Diminescu, 2008). This traveler successfully—perhaps even seamlessly—integrates transnational interactions with family into their daily routines. Many migrants around the world have, indeed, experienced the “extent, intensity and speed” (Vertovec, 2009, p. 14) at which the transnational social bond can be maintained in a communications age. In the early 2000s, it was the cheap phone call that acted as a “kind of social glue” (Vertovec, 2004, p. 219) for migrants and their networks. That adhesive “has largely shifted to the digital environment” (Marlowe, 2020, p. 275) in the years since—and so, too, has the connected migrant. Smartphones and their associated apps have provided instant, cost-effective, and spontaneous ways of keeping in touch (Waldinger, 2013). In adopting such tools, the connected migrant has gone global, both in terms of their own transnational communicative routines and as a figure representative of a connected world.

It is too idealistic, however, to assume that all migrants have transitioned neatly from cheap phone calls to media environments in which transnational interaction is wholly convenient and just as fulfilling. Likewise, it is too simplistic to conclude that digital media has made transnational communication an

even playing field. Many factors, from gender to age, shape access to new media (Baldassar, 2016). Refugees, in particular, face significant barriers to internet access. Smartphones and social media offer new ways to stay in touch with distant family members (Marlowe, 2020), while being constantly connected “is now recognized as key for all migrants, including refugees” (Gifford & Wilding, 2013, p. 561). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2016, p. 13), however, reports that refugees are some “50 per cent less likely to have an internet-enabled phone and approximately two and a half times more likely to be living without a phone” compared with global averages. Furthermore, for those without literacy in English, using the internet can be difficult or even impossible (UNHCR, 2016).

Set to this backdrop, this article focuses on migrants in a refugee settlement context and the challenges they face

La Trobe University, Australia

### Corresponding Author:

Shane Worrell, Department of Social Inquiry, College of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce, La Trobe University, Plenty Road, Melbourne, Victoria 3086, Australia.

Email: s.worrell@latrobe.edu.au

Twitter: @shaneworrell



accessing and using digital communicative technology. In particular, the focus is on smartphones, social media, and video-calling applications. Using data from a study of Karen humanitarian migrants who have settled in a regional Australian city, I compare and contrast the transnational communicative experiences of two groups of people, separated by age and positioned on either side of a so-called “digital divide” (Friemel, 2016). I liken generational differences between the two groups when it comes to proficiency with English to generational differences between the two groups when it comes to proficiency with smartphones and apps. I argue that both processes of attaining proficiency demonstrate generational differences in learning “dominant languages”—one which applies to an offline world and the other an online world. I also argue that responses to overcoming differences, be they grounded in English or the language of a smartphone app, are similar in function. For that reason, I adapt the concept of language brokering to describe the “digital brokering” that can occur alongside it. This study supports previous research that shows younger migrants are often active in helping their parents communicate better in English in their new surrounds. Using the concept of “digital brokering” as the driving force, this article offers something new by demonstrating how younger migrants can similarly help their parents navigate the online “language” of smartphones, social media, and video calls.

### Language Brokering in Migrant Communities

Migrant children are often more exposed than their parents to the dominant language and customs of the countries in which they settle (Rainey et al., 2014). This is especially evident in humanitarian migrant contexts (Hynie et al., 2013). Consequently, younger migrants often face expectations from their family to help translate language in a range of situations (Rainey et al., 2014). Through language brokering, young people actively construct their parents’ social reality (Bauer, 2016). Tasks of the language broker include helping parents understand messages conveyed in letters, medical appointments, business transactions, and television shows (Dorner et al., 2008). Language brokering is part of a wider portfolio of cultural brokering that migrant children provide their parents in a new environment (Lazarevic et al., 2014, p. 518).

### Experiences of Language Brokering

Underpinning language brokering is the need for an older person to communicate effectively enough to function in a new setting, despite lacking proficiency in the dominant language. When a younger family member develops more advanced language skills, they have the potential to become a pivotal part of an older person’s communicative routines. As Kam et al. (2017) explain,

Language brokering occurs because family members lack familiarity with the new environment’s mainstream language and culture. They need assistance from language brokers to successfully function in the new environment. (p. 30)

Language-brokering research has often focused on adolescents and youths of Mexican and Central American background living in the United States (see Corona et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2018; and Roche et al., 2014, for examples). Literature in the field has often focused on the *socioemotional, behavioral, academic, relational, cultural, and parental* outcomes of language brokering (Shen et al., 2018). Studies vary in their assessment of whether language brokering improves or strains relationships between parents and their children (Roche et al., 2014). Parents have been observed to have “mixed emotions,” specifically pride and shame, about relying on their children for brokering tasks (Corona et al., 2012, p. 795). Similarly, younger migrants have reported feeling pride and embarrassment in their role as brokers (Niehaus & Kumpiene, 2014, p. 125).

### Digital Divides and Refugee Resettlement

A situation in which children have superior literacy skills to their parents has a digital equivalent. Differences in digital proficiency between generations are often explained in terms of “digital divides.” Such divides relate to the supposed advantages that “digital natives”—young people who have grown up online—have over nondigital natives when it comes to the internet. Commonly, so-called “digital natives” have been born after 1980 and use digital technology, such as social media, smartphones, and the internet seamlessly, in ways that preceding generations, including their parents, supposedly do not (Akçayır et al., 2016, p. 435). A first-level digital divide relates primarily to differences between internet users and non-users (Friemel, 2016), whereas a second-level digital divide refers to how variable levels of proficiency can be among those online (Hargittai et al., 2018).

A digital divide is commonly theorized in terms of age but is also associated with factors such as education, gender, and income (Friemel, 2016). For this reason, it is overly simplistic to suggest that age, especially a precise date of birth, wholly determines access to, and proficiency with, the internet and digital devices. Age, however, is a useful categorical tool in which to explore digital differences, particularly in terms of access to and use of communicative media such as social media, video calling, and the smart devices on which they are increasingly used. Age, therefore, provides a useful lens through which to explore how different generations of humanitarian migrants use smartphones and social media in an environment where language differences are also likely present.

Although handwritten letters and telephone calls have long provided ways of keeping in touch over significant distance, a multiplicity of options have come to characterize the

21st-century transnational communicative experience. Communications devices and platforms have transcended their status as single media items existing in isolation. They have become enmeshed in an “integrated structure” of *poly-media* (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Cumulative interactions, across borders and through smartphones, have created a state of *connected presence* (Licoppe, 2004) for transnational families in which the means of communicating are permanently available. This evolution has blurred the lines between absence and presence (Licoppe, 2004).

For many migrants, however, communicating with family in other countries is not yet the seamless task it promises to be. This is especially the experience of families from a refugee background. The need for connectivity with transnational family, the UNHCR (2016) argues, is in fact “greater for refugees than for the general population because displacement often separates refugees from their loved ones” (p. 16). After long journeys across borders and onto third countries like Australia, many humanitarian migrants remain concerned about relatives in “perilous circumstances in transit countries, conflict zones and refugee camps” (Robertson et al., 2016, pp. 221–222). Transnational family members must “actively produce” co-presence (Wilding, 2018, p. 120) in ways that those physically proximate to each other need not. Video calls, which help achieve a type of “real-time co-presence” (Baldassar, 2016), and other types of digitally mediated co-presence (Alinejad, 2019), through instant messages or social media posts, are increasingly popular ways of staying in touch. In migrant households, however, younger people tend to use the internet more than their parents (Ballantyne & Burke, 2017).

Just as language brokering is relevant to migrant families, therefore, so are discussions of generational differences based on digital technology. In a smartphone and social media age, these differences may contribute to varied experiences of transnational communication between two generations within the same migrant family home. An example of this might be an older migrant lacking familiarity with digital media—such as smartphones, social media, and apps—and not being able to keep in touch with family overseas in the same way that a younger person does. This study highlights that such differences exist among Karen humanitarian migrant families living in a regional Australian city. It also demonstrates that a response to overcoming barriers to communication is for younger people to help their parents to use technology, a process I call “digital brokering.”

## The Research

The analysis for this study draws from interviews with 30 ethnic Karen adults who arrived in Australia as humanitarian migrants. The Karen are a diverse group of people, found mainly near the border of Burma (also known as Myanmar) and Thailand (Green & Lockley, 2012). Many Karen in Burma have suffered at the hands of the military during a

decades-long civil war (Williams, 2012). As hostilities intensified in the 1990s, an increasing number of Karen fled their villages for refugee camps in Thailand (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011; Lee, 2014). Western countries, including Australia, began resettling Karen from the Thai border camps in the 2000s (Spivey & Lewis, 2015). Humanitarian migrants referred by the UNHCR to Australia’s humanitarian migration program have historically settled in Australia’s larger cities, especially Melbourne and Sydney (Fozdar & Hartley, 2013). Government policies in the first part of the 21st century have resulted in more humanitarian migrants settling in regional areas (Curry et al., 2018).

## Research Methods

Participants in this study settled in the same regional Australian city in the 10 years prior to their interviews, which were conducted between June 2017 and January 2018. I interviewed participants in their homes or at a university campus in the regional city in which they lived. Of the 30 interviews, 27 were conducted with the help of a Karen-language interpreter. The majority of participants provided responses in Sgaw Karen language, although younger participants generally conversed at least partially in English. Each interview was completed in a single session, which varied in length between 30 min and 2 hr. Interviews generally lasted at least 45 min. I transcribed all interviews, coded them using the software package NVivo and analyzed data using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). I assigned all participants pseudonyms, some of which feature in this article.

Participants were divided into two groups: those aged below 30 ( $n=16$ ) and those aged above 40 ( $n=14$ ). Of the 16 participants in the younger group, 14 were aged 23 or below, whereas the oldest participant in the study was 59. The two groups were divided based on notions of a so-called “digital divide” (Akçayır et al., 2016) and to reflect two generations of a migrant community. Participants were selected if they were Karen, had arrived in Australia as humanitarian migrants, and were aged 18 or above. Of the 30 participants, 18 were women and 12 were men. The younger group consisted mostly of women. Most of the older participants had been born in Burma and grown up in Karen (also known as Kayin) state, where their people had fought for independence and autonomy from the central government (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten, 2008). Fleeing persecution, these participants had entered Thailand, where they had stayed in refugee camps for years or decades before resettling in Australia. Many younger participants were born in refugee camps in Thailand, whereas several had fled Burma with their family as small children.

Semi-structured interviews began by focusing on participants’ early life, their migration to Australia, their family, and their daily routine. Discussion then progressed to digital technology, particularly in the context of transnational family communication. All 30 participants had family members

overseas with whom they wished to remain connected. Some of these relatives were in Thailand, where they lived in border refugee camps or in cities and towns elsewhere. Other family lived in Burma, having remained or returned there. Some had been resettled in other countries with humanitarian migrant programs, such as the United States and Norway. Participants also had family in other parts of Australia, although these relationships were not the specific focus of this study. All 30 participants were able to keep in touch with family in other countries.

At the time of being interviewed, all but one participant had access to a smartphone or tablet device and a stable internet connection in their home. The use of smart devices for transnational communication among the two groups was widespread. At least by the time of the interviews, it was. Participants, however, reported varied journeys to such usage. These variations are most noticeable when comparing the experiences of the younger group with those of the older group. Younger participants had generally learned how to use technology from their peers through proximate family, school, and cultural networks. Of the 16 younger participants, 13 had learned how to use social media from another young person. This often coincided with their using smartphones and led to their learning how to integrate video calling and instant messaging into their transnational communicative routines.

Many younger participants reported helping their parents use smartphones and video-calling and social media apps to maintain important transnational relationships—but usually sometime after settling in Australia. Furthermore, almost all older participants (only some of whom had relatives in the younger group) spoke of receiving significant help from their children to transition to smartphones and transnational video calls. It soon became clear that a culture of practical support to use technology was evident among Karen humanitarian migrants trying to stay in touch with family in other countries. The next section explores the connection between this type of digital assistance and the performance of language brokering.

## From Language Brokering to Digital Brokering

In this section, I focus on settlement challenges for older participants that created a need for younger people to help them with language and then technology. The first part of this section explores how older participants were helped, whereas the second part focuses on how younger participants provided such support. Although this structure implies a relatively linear process, the provision of both language and digital support was more complex than that. For example, it is important to recognize the resilience and skills older participants had developed in response to the challenges of migration and how that helped them be active, not just passive, learners. It should be noted that younger participants talked about also helping older

people outside this study, whereas older participants spoke about younger people who also did not participate in this research. This suggests a wider occurrence of language and digital assistance in their community.

### *Learning From a Child*

Many of the older participants' challenges after settlement in Australia were pronounced. When these challenges centered on language proficiency, they often affected other aspects of life, resulting in an older person being marginalized from the wider society in which they lived. Learning English, therefore, was a key part of inclusion for older participants. For some, attending an adult education college to learn English was the first experience of formal education they had ever had. Wah Wah, a 47-year-old man, was one who found it "very difficult" to adapt. "I also felt a bit sad, as I had never been to school," he said. "For the first month, the teacher had to hold the pen in my hand." Other older participants felt the demands of home and work, which drew them away from formal learning opportunities. Some of the women had withdrawn from studies to care for a partner, whereas others, male and female, took jobs to provide for their families.

Larr Kwee, a 42-year-old woman who also had never been to school, spoke of the challenges of learning English at an adult education college. It made her dizzy, she said, as though she had a headache. All of what she learned in the classroom "disappeared" the moment she arrived back home. Her solution, she said, was to rely more on her children. In Australia, she said, young people were "expected to help." Thar Ler Saw, a 59-year-old single parent, spoke of the difficulties that older Karen people faced when it came to learning English and how their children helped them to overcome these challenges as their own language skills improved. He described the support his daughter provided, saying,

With letters from the mailbox, when I have parent-teacher meetings, she helps. And shopping, when I don't know how many kilograms or what the salesman is asking me . . . I always have to ask for her help. My daughter feels happy with that.

Brokering soon began to extend from matters of English language to technology. As outlined, all 30 participants had important transnational relationships they wished to maintain. They were all able to keep in touch with family overseas but to varying degrees. At the time of being interviewed, all but one participant kept in touch using the internet—often video calls and/or social media on a smartphone—or a combination of the internet and mobile phone calls. Of the 30 participants, only one participant relied solely on calls made with a mobile phone. Older participants, however, had often experienced a lag in transitioning to communicative routines that included the internet. This was often despite their arriving in Australia with a younger person who used smartphones, social media, and video calls.

Many older participants spoke of learning from their children how to use smartphones, video-calling apps, and, to a lesser extent, social media platforms. Similar to the stories told by the younger group, the older participants spoke of being introduced to such technology informally while their child or children interacted with a relative overseas. It was not until she had spent 4 years living in Australia that Eh Law Gay, a 57-year-old woman, learned she could video call with her daughter in the United States. It was another of her daughters, living elsewhere in the same regional Australia city, who introduced Eh Law Gay to the video call. It was a transformative experience for Eh Law Gay, who had struggled to adapt to life in Australia, often feeling homesick for the refugee camp in Thailand she had left behind. Being able to see her daughter's face through video, despite the distance between them, made Eh Law Gay feel "close to her, not far away." Consequently, it also made Eh Law Gay feel more at home in Australia. She said,

It brought back a lot of memories of when we were living together and when she looked after me in the refugee camp. I felt much happier, because I was able to see her family through video call. After the video calls, I felt more comfortable [living in Australia].

Reliance on children was a recurring theme in older participants' stories, although it presented in various forms. Ler Soe Ber, a 42-year-old man, had learned how to video call from his daughter and developed his skills to the point that he could speak to multiple people at once. "Now I am working so I don't have much time to learn about social media," he said. "Young Karen people are good at social media nowadays." Another man around the same age, Ner Too Soe, 41, had received help from his teenage son to set up a Facebook Messenger account and ongoing assistance from his teenage daughter to use it. Wah Wah, a slightly older man at 47, also used a smartphone to video call after his son set up a social media account for him. Wah Wah's skills with digital technology had developed to a point that he could communicate effectively, although he remained realistic about his limitations. He laughed when asked whether he would be able to help someone else in his community video call with family in other countries. Wah Wah explained that he could open his Facebook profile, "like" a few posts and video call people, but he was altogether unsure how to set up an account for someone else.

Some older participants thought it reasonable that their children—who had received more education than they had—should teach them how to use technology. Wah Wah, who had never attended school as a child, was one of these. He was happy that his son could help him. Ngway Ngwar, another father in his 40s, said many Karen people of his generation had no formal education, so it was incumbent upon them to make the most of their children's knowledge. "I feel good," he said when asked to describe what it felt like to seek his daughter's advice about smartphones and apps. "I haven't

really learned much from school [adult education college]. Whenever, I go to computer class, it's just a short period of time," he said. Not everyone, however, had a young person around who could help them. Koe Kit, a man in his 40s, was the only person in the older group not able to use the internet. He wanted to—but he did not know how. Koe Kit and his wife owned a mobile phone that could not connect to the internet. Furthermore, their only child was of early primary school age. Koe Kit lamented that his boy was too young to teach him how to video call, which he sensed would be a great way of keeping in touch with people overseas.

Older participants were often surprised to learn what smartphones could do. Boe Loe Thar, a woman aged in her 50s, was one such participant. She had arrived in Australia with her husband and a teenage son in 2009. Phone calls had underpinned Boe Loe Thar's transnational communication in her early days in Australia. It was only after some years that the sheer "surprise" of seeing her son video call someone that Boe Loe Thar became aware of the world in which she now lived. "I'd never seen anything like that," she said. "That you can . . . see each other face to face is a bit surprising." She had since become reliant on her son to facilitate her transnational calls. Using technology, Boe Loe Thar said, remained "confusing" and something she could not do herself; younger people, she believed, were just better suited to it.

The story of Say Thu Soe captures the significance of generational digital assistance better than any. Through video calling, Say Thu Soe, a 48-year-old woman, saw her daughter's face again, decades after they were separated. It was a reunion made possible by Say Thu Soe's son showing her how to use smartphones, social media, and video-calling apps. Like other stories in this study, this one also involved informal brokering that came about by chance. Say Thu Soe lamented that her son had not shown her much about the internet—but he had actually been the crucial link between Say Thu Soe and her daughter, who lived in Bangkok, that allowed them to transition from voice calls to video calls.

More than 20 years before our interview, Say Thu Soe had fled her village in Burma, leaving her young daughter with her ex-husband's family. She spent nearly 10 years in a refugee camp in Thailand, where she remarried and gave birth to her son, before being granted a visa to settle in Australia. Contacts within the Karen community in Australia helped her reconnect with her daughter, who had since moved to Bangkok. Say Thu Soe was able to call and speak to her for the first time in more than 20 years. It was a heartfelt reunion, one that left the mother wanting to be closer to a daughter she so dearly missed. "I wanted to see her face," Say Thu Soe said. She realized that seeing her daughter—virtually, at least—was now possible. However, she had no way of making that happen herself, so she called on her son for help. In acting as the broker, the teenager used a video call to bring his mother "face to face" with the adult daughter she had last seen as a small child. In doing so, Say Thu Soe's son met a sister he had only ever heard stories of. Say Thu Soe described

the “tears of joy” that her visual reunion brought about and the effect it had on her life. The reunion hardly felt real, she said, but it made her so happy.

Although significant and heartfelt, Say Thu Soe’s story, like those of other participants, did not have a fairytale ending. Vast physical distance still separated Say Thu Soe from her daughter in Thailand. The longing to “be there” with her daughter remained for Say Thu Soe, as it did for other participants who had family in other countries. But the facilitation of video calls, and other digital communication through smartphones and the internet, provided ways of better “keeping in touch” despite the distance. Being able to experience more intimate communication through digital technology seems not just a possible bridge toward a physical reunion but also a significant outcome in itself.

### *Helping a Parent*

Younger participants faced pressure to help their elders communicate, even as they adjusted to their own challenges of a new environment. But they sensed they could help—and so they did. Many acted as language brokers for their parents or other elders. They attended medical appointments to interpret what doctors said. They read letters that arrived in the mail. They looked for rental properties into which their families could move. *Taw Boe*, a 22-year-old woman, performed many language brokering tasks. Like other younger participants, she spoke of the need to take responsibility, especially now that her family had left the familiarity of a refugee camp. Younger people were more suited to the challenges of Australia, both groups believed, so they helped their parents how they could. Beyond a simple obligation to help, younger participants were proud when they felt they were making a difference to their parents’ settlement experiences and frustrated when their efforts were in vain. *Tha Koh*, a 23-year-old woman, was one participant who wanted to solve her parents’ language challenges, despite facing her own. Not being able to read all the letters that arrived for her parents, for example, made her “so disappointed.” As she watched her parents get older in Australia, she wanted to “help with everything.”

This soon extended to support using digital technology. Younger participants generally spoke of helping their parents in the suburban homes in which they shared space and a Wi-Fi connection. This help was offered in various informal ways, such as by introducing them to smartphones, letting them share a social media account, setting up a social media account for them, and taking requests for them to video call relatives in other countries. Some participants said helping their parents involved not only equipping them with the knowledge and skills to use smartphones and apps but also sharing with them their potential to create richer transnational communicative experiences.

Most of the younger participants had helped other Karen people use social media and video apps. One who had not provided such assistance was *Tha Ku Htoo Bler*, a 21-year-old

male who, in moving to Australia, separated from his parents. Furthermore, he had lived in the country less than 1 year at the time of being interviewed. That *Tha Ku Htoo Bler* had separated from his parents is significant: Most younger people had helped parents who lived in close physical proximity to them. Similarly, 13 of 14 participants in the older group had learned about smartphones, social media, and video-calling apps from their children, who were teenagers or young adults at the time. No one in the older group helped other people in their community use digital technology. Although some of the older participants talked of such peer support occurring in the community more widely, no one spoke of a parent helping their child use social media. Help using technology was something that flowed only between peers of roughly the same age, or upward from younger people to their parents and elders.

Younger participants were sometimes met with resistance from their parents when it came to the internet and smartphone technology being used in their house. However, as *Kaw Thu Wah*, a 19-year-old woman, found out, such opposition subsided if the younger person invited their parents to be part of a transnational communicative experience. “Our parents [didn’t] know how to use the internet,” she said. *Kaw Thu Wah*’s parents had at first yelled at her for spending too much time online, but before too long—with help from *Kaw Thu Wah*—they too began video calling another of their daughters in the United States, speaking to her for hours at a time. Helping her parents gave *Kaw Thu Wah* some relief, but she also saw it as a necessity for them: A video call was a way for her parents to better interact with their granddaughter who was too young to talk on the phone. If *Kaw Thu Wah* did not help her parents, she wondered, who would?

A younger person helping a parent to use smartphones and apps often came sometime after families settled in Australia. *Saw Law Tha*, a 19-year-old woman, learned to use Facebook herself soon after arriving. It was 2 years, however, before she began helping her parents video call. Once their independence with the technology grew, she said, their lives seemed to improve. “Before they were able to use a Facebook account, they were not happy living in Australia,” she said. “But after I taught them . . . they felt much better.” *Saw Law Tha*’s delay in helping her parents could be explained in terms of how technology was advancing. In her case, she used social media to interact using text and images. When video calls became more embedded in these apps, she introduced her parents to their potential, allowing them to transition from voice calls to video calls, in the process effectively bypassing text-based communication. This is important for older participants with limited writing skills, as was the case for many. For others, such as *Hser Pyo Way*, a 20-year-old woman, it simply took longer for her parents to be exposed to the video calls she was making. It was a full 8 months after her family arrived in Australia that she began helping her parents better connect with their parents back in Southeast Asia.

Participant *Len Wah Htoo*, a 19-year-old woman, provided such help to her father and believed many other young people

were doing the same. Being the broker of technology, however, presented challenges for the young person; it was satisfying but it was also difficult. Younger participants sometimes shared their social media accounts with their parents—and took them on their smartphones with them when they went out. Ner Moo Htoo Soe, a 25-year-old man, felt happy when he helped his parents but regretted that he was too busy to help them learn more. “The easy thing for her is if I try to teach her [my mother] how to speak, how to learn—because we stay in the house together,” he said. Similar thoughts about the use of technology weighed on the minds of other younger participants who believed older people were becoming overly reliant on their children. Ta Bler Aye, a 20-year-old woman, expressed such sentiments, observing that although she frequently set up video calls for her parents, she did not believe she was actually helping them become independent.

Helping a parent develop skills to use technology independently could ease the burden on a younger person. Taw Boe, a 22-year-old woman, was one such participant. She had migrated to Australia with her mother and two siblings and would often speak to another sister in Thailand through video calls. At first, Taw Boe’s mother questioned her internet use, before realizing that video calls made it possible to see someone “face to face,” albeit virtually, despite their being in another country. This was a revelation to Taw Boe’s mother—as it was to many other older participants who were surprised at just how much better internet-based communication was than a phone call. Taw Boe began showing her mother what else the technology could do and involving her in transnational conversations. Her mother was soon so enthusiastic that she was constantly demanding that Taw Boe get her connected. It became a source of frustration for the 22-year-old. She recalled how “annoying” it was that her mother was always asking her to initiate video calls and constantly using her social media account. Taw Boe lay awake at night stressing over her responsibilities, before realizing she needed to help her mum use the technology independently.

Taw Boe observed the challenges her mother, a widow in her forties, faced in Australia. She had limited English and, initially at least, few employment options. She found it difficult to adjust to the colder weather in winter and missed family who remained in Asia. Her challenges in Australia were such that she spent most of her first 2 years in her new surrounds wanting to return to the refugee camp she had left behind. So, Taw Boe began teaching her mother to video call. She set up a Facebook account for her and helped her reach a point where she could use it by herself. Taw Boe’s mother eventually found a job and developed her English, which helped her feel more settled in Australia. But Taw Boe believed that her mother being able to chat more easily—“face-to-face”—with her daughter overseas was also significant in making her happier in her new surrounds. “It makes it easier for her to communicate and for [them] to see each other’s faces and feel close to each other,” Taw Boe said.

“She has told me that she doesn’t want to go back anymore. She feels happy here.”

Accounts like this highlight the support younger participants have provided their parents to use technology to better connect with transnational networks. As demonstrated, younger people were aware of the benefits such communication had for an older person, both in terms of maintaining relationships over distance and feeling settled in their new surrounds. Younger participants were also aware of some of the challenges they faced in providing such support.

## Discussion

Differences in digital technology proficiency between younger and older humanitarian migrants are evident in this study. These differences prevented older participants from communicating with transnational family in the same multifaceted ways as younger participants, at least in the early stages of their resettlement in Australia. In this context, it might be most straightforward to consider the difference in digital proficiency between the two groups simply in terms of a “digital divide” (Friemel, 2016). Age-specific understandings of digital divides are relevant when it comes to explaining the differences themselves. Educational differences between the two generations also seem to contribute to a “digital divide.” It is not the digital divide itself, however, that is most striking in this study but rather the participants’ response to it, which I call “digital” brokering. This type of brokering is the result of collective action aimed at helping older people overcome digital literacy challenges in a transnational communicative setting increasingly reliant on the internet and smartphones.

Lee Lee Wah, a 19-year-old woman, provided crucial insight into how a culture of children helping their parents expanded beyond English language brokering and into this realm of digital brokering. Lee Lee Wah faced her own challenges with English. Her brother spoke it better, so he was often the one who helped their parents with English. This inspired rather than deterred Lee Lee Wah, who remained determined to help her parents in whatever ways she could. It was through technology—something she did feel confident using—that she fulfilled this aspiration. “If I understand, I help,” she said. It was all part of being in a Karen family, and a migrant community, where everyone helped each other. Lee Lee Wah’s account shows a direct link between the motivations behind language brokering and the motivations behind digital brokering: a need to help older people communicate better in a new environment. For participants in this study, the offline environment is regional Australia and the mainstream language is English. Language brokering, therefore, emerges as a response to challenges faced when someone lacks the literacy needed to engage in communication. In an online environment, where digital technology is the mainstream language, it is digital brokering that serves a similar purpose.

Lee Lee Wah's account also demonstrates that even if the same young person is not performing both types of brokering, a culture of language brokering can inspire the performance of digital brokering. While some participants, like *Taw Boe*, provided both language brokering and digital brokering to a parent, Lee Lee Wah was unable to do one, so she focused on the other. This demonstrates how digital brokering, having emerged from language brokering, can remain intertwined with it, or operate more independently of it, in parallel. Whatever the case, it seems only to broaden the portfolio of support young migrants provide their parents. It further emphasizes the extent to which younger humanitarian migrants, Karen people included, are "resettlement champions" for their parents (Hynie et al., 2013, p. 24).

### *Better Transnational Connection Through Technology*

In this study, digital brokering has emerged in an environment where language brokering is frequently performed. This is not surprising. As mentioned earlier, Kam et al. (2017) describe language brokering as occurring in situations where "family members lack familiarity with the new environment's mainstream language and culture" (p. 30). Participants in this study spoke of such situations: Everyone interviewed had faced challenges learning English. As a result, it affected how they communicated in their new environment, which consisted of interactions at school, work, medical appointments, and while shopping. Participants' homes were sanctuaries where they could speak Karen freely, but letters and phone calls from people in the wider community were reminders of the pressures of their new environment to become more proficient in the dominant language. Such challenges were far more pronounced among the older group. Younger participants were more likely to have learned some English in a refugee camp or developed it faster in an educational setting once in Australia. Younger people, sometimes working in teams with their siblings, responded to a range of challenges their parents faced. In this context, digital brokering has emerged as the latest response to a literacy challenge. It is possible that in other settings where parents are less competent with technology than their children, barriers to better digital literacy may not be overcome due to their being no comparable brokering culture already present. The child-parent relationship is, therefore, important to understanding digital brokering, just like it is central to language brokering, although digital brokering could conceivably occur in other family (or nonfamily) structures and settings.

Digital brokering, in the context of this study, is something that occurs outside of digitally mediated co-presence; it is grounded in physical co-presence. Indeed, its aim is to broker virtual interaction between migrants in their new offline surrounds and transnational family members elsewhere in the world. Digital brokering is a suitable name for this process due to the potentially infinite platforms on which two

people can now connect transnationally. It is compatible with discussions about the diverse communicative landscapes of connected presence (Licoppe, 2004) and polymedia (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Digital brokering is not simply smartphone or video-calling brokering, although such tools were central to many participants' stories. (Video calling, especially, provided participants a richer communicative experience than traditional phone calls.) Digital brokering is a response to a person's need to maintain meaningful transnational relationships; their need to do so through digital technology that ensures clear and intimate interactions; and their inability to achieve these things without help from someone more digitally literate than they are.

### *Further Considerations and Implications for Wider Scholarship*

This study emerges as research about language and cultural brokering continues to widen in scope (see Lazarevic, 2017; Omori & Kishimoto, 2019, as examples). Digital brokering provides further insight into expanding responsibilities of a young migrant. It is useful, then, to consider how else digital brokering might be further conceptualized. An obvious next step is to consider consequences of digital brokering more in terms of its shaping of intergenerational and intrafamilial relationships. Digital brokering, like language brokering, can yield positive results for migrant families. But better understanding the challenges it creates is also important. This study hints at the frustrations and difficulties of power inversions and hierarchical shifts that occur when a parent becomes increasingly reliant on a child (even when that child is an adult) for their communicative needs. Further digital brokering research might adapt analyses of language brokering to consider these challenges more. A good starting point might be the aforementioned article by Shen et al. (2018) that highlights the *socioemotional, behavioral, academic, relational, cultural, and parental* outcomes of language brokering.

In addition, by entering digital worlds mediated by smartphones and social media, participants become involved, in various ways, in *interveillance*, which Christensen and Jansson (2015) characterize largely as not only "watching and judging networked Others," but also "watching Others watching oneself" and being aware of one's own networked self (p. 1480). In terms of digital brokering, there is an unanswered question of freedom for both older participants and younger participants. Working in somewhat collaboratively ways to facilitate transnational communication seems at odds with the highly individualized world of smartphones and social media, suggesting tensions might occur. *Taw Boe's* frustration is perhaps already an example of this, especially if she has sensed the implications that her mother's interference with her digital activity might have on her identity, not just her time and energy.

In terms of wider surveillance issues, it might be expected that families from a refugee background, especially older members, might be concerned that increased digital presence and visibility could lead to their being watched more by hostile parties, in this case, authorities in Burma. This research did not generate such data, meaning any discussion about this would be speculative. But additional research into digital brokering might focus specifically on this issue, especially in light of events in Myanmar (Burma) in early 2021 when a military coup took place and the internet was shut down (Goldman, 2021).

Finally, it should be recognized that digital skills and literacies vary across generations; it is not always the case that children are more digitally literate than their parents. It was generally so that younger people in this study *were* more digitally savvy than their elders. But there were also young adults who had little interest in the internet and older participants who used it for hours every day. Participants were developing digital skills at different rates. Even in a digital brokering context, where intergenerational roles are flipped, it is, therefore, worth engaging with research (such as Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2019) that considers how parents might be better supported to help their children's digital development—even as they learn from them and with them.

## Conclusion

This article conceptualizes digital brokering as a type of cultural brokering, similar to the language brokering that occurs in migrant families. Like language brokering, digital brokering is a type of assistance one person provides another to help them communicate more effectively in a new environment. While language brokering centers on the dominant spoken language of the society in which migrants are located, digital brokering relates to smartphones, social media, video-calling apps, and the internet more generally—communicative tools that might be considered a dominant “language” of a transnational migration digital age.

Younger migrants often have a stronger grasp than older family members of the dominant language in their new surrounds. This assists them to provide language brokering to their parents to help them communicate better and, therefore, navigate their way through everyday life. Similarly, this study has identified that younger migrants often have more proficiency than older family members when it comes to communicative technology in their new surrounds. This allows them to potentially provide digital brokering to their parents to help them communicate more effectively with family in other countries. Such brokering also helps older people better navigate their way through everyday life, which increasingly is a transnational experience wherever they are. Digital brokering, like language brokering, can help address communicative differences between two generations of a migrant family, particularly those from a refugee background.

The concept of digital brokering is a contribution to migration literature, particularly refugee studies. It may interest both scholars and policymakers concerned with the role of digital technology in humanitarian migration and refugee settlement contexts. It also offers an opportunity for debates about digital and social media to be more inclusive of people from refugee backgrounds. Digital brokering offers further insight into the significant challenges that humanitarian migrants face after settlement in a third country. This study demonstrates that two generations of a migrant family can face markedly different challenges when it comes to transnational communication, even when living in the same house. It also highlights that humanitarian migrants are forever innovative in shaping better settlement experiences for themselves by helping each other, despite the challenges they face.

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the people who took part in this study and the interpreter who assisted with the interviews (and who has not been named for the sake of privacy).

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Shane Worrell  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2296-9379>

## References

- Akçayır, M., Dündar, H., & Akçayır, G. (2016). What makes you a digital native? Is it enough to be born after 1980? *Computers in Human Behavior*, *60*(1), 435–440. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.02.089>
- Alinejad, D. (2019). Careful co-presence: The transnational mediation of emotional intimacy. *Social Media + Society*, *5*(2), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119854222>
- Baldassar, L. (2016). De-demonizing distance in mobile family lives: Co-presence, care circulation and polymedia as vibrant matter. *Global Networks*, *16*(2), 145–163. <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12109>
- Ballantyne, G., & Burke, L. (2017). “People live in their heads a lot”: Polymedia, life course, and meanings of home among Melbourne’s older Irish community. *Transnational Social Review*, *7*(1), 10–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2016.1277856>
- Bauer, E. (2016). Practising kinship care: Children as language brokers in migrant families. *Childhood*, *23*(1), 22–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568215574917>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

- Christensen, M., & Jansson, A. (2015). Complicit surveillance, interveillance, and the question of cosmopolitanism: Toward a phenomenological understanding of mediatization. *New Media & Society*, 17(9), 1473–1491. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814528678>
- Corona, R., Stevens, L. F., Halfond, R. W., Shaffer, C. M., Reid-Quiñones, K., & Gonzalez, T. (2012). A qualitative analysis of what Latino parents and adolescents think and feel about language brokering. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 21(5), 788–798. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-011-9536-2>
- Curry, O., Smedley, C., & Lenette, C. (2018). What is “successful” resettlement? Refugee narratives from regional New South Wales in Australia. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 16(4), 430–448. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2017.1358410>
- Diminescu, D. (2008). The connected migrant: An epistemological manifesto. *Social Science Information*, 47(4), 565–579. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018408096447>
- Dorner, L. M., Orellana, M. F., & Jiménez, R. (2008). It’s one of those things that you do to help the family. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 23(5), 515–543. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558408317563>
- Fozdar, F., & Hartley, L. (2013). Refugee resettlement in Australia: What we know and need to know. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 32(3), 23–51. <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdt009>
- Friemel, T. (2016). The digital divide has grown old: Determinants of a digital divide among seniors. *New Media & Society*, 18(2), 313–331. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814538648>
- Gifford, S., & Wilding, R. (2013). Digital escapes? ICTs, settlement and belonging among Karen youth in Melbourne, Australia. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 26(4), 558–575. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fet020>
- Goldman, R. (2021, April 9). Myanmar’s coup, explained. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/2021-myanmar-coup.html>
- Green, G., & Lockley, E. G. (2012). Communication practices of the Karen in Sheffield: Seeking to navigate their three zones of displacement. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 22(6), 566–583. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2012.717095>
- Hargittai, E., Piper, A. M., & Morris, M. R. (2018). From internet access to internet skills: Digital inequality among older adults. *Universal Access in the Information Society*, 18, 881–890. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10209-018-0617-5>
- Hynie, M., Guruge, S., & Shakya, Y. B. (2013). Family relationships of Afghan, Karen and Sudanese refugee youth. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 44(3), 11–28. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ces.2013.0011>
- Kam, J. A., Guntzwiller, L. M., & Stohl, C. (2017). New approaches to studying language brokering from a communication perspective. In R. Weisskirch (Ed.), *Language brokering in immigrant families: Theories and contexts* (pp. 26–47). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315644714-3>
- Kenny, P., & Lockwood-Kenny, K. (2011). A mixed blessing: Karen resettlement to the United States. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 24(2), 217–238. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fer009>
- Kim, S. Y., Hou, Y., Song, J., Schwartz, S. J., Chen, S., Zhang, M., Perreira, K. M., & Parra-Medina, D. (2018). Profiles of language brokering experiences and contextual stressors: Implications for adolescent outcomes in Mexican immigrant families. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 47(8), 1629–1648. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-018-0851-4>
- Kuroiwa, Y., & Verkuyten, M. (2008). Narratives and the constitution of a common identity: The Karen in Burma. *Identities*, 15(4), 391–412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10702890802201685>
- Lazarevic, V. (2017). Effects of cultural brokering on individual wellbeing and family dynamics among immigrant youth. *Journal of Adolescence*, 55, 77–87. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2016.12.010>
- Lazarevic, V., Raffaelli, M., & Wiley, A. (2014). Language and non-linguistic brokering: Diversity of experiences of immigrant young adults from eastern Europe. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 45(4), 517–535. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.45.4.517>
- Lee, S. K. (2014). Security, economy and the modes of refugees’ livelihood pursuit: Focus on Karen refugees in Thailand. *Asian Studies Review*, 38(3), 461–479. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2014.931345>
- Licoppe, C. (2004). “Connected” presence: The emergence of a new repertoire for managing social relationships in a changing communication technoscape. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 22(1), 135–156. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d323t>
- Livingstone, S., & Blum-Ross, A. (2019). Parents’ role in supporting, brokering or impeding their children’s connected learning and media literacy. *Cultural Science Journal*, 11(1), 68–77. <https://doi.org/10.5334/csci.124>
- Madianou, M., & Miller, D. (2012). Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16(2), 169–187. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877912452486>
- Marlowe, J. (2020). Refugee resettlement, social media and the social organization of difference. *Global Networks*, 20, 274–291. <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12233>
- Niehaus, K., & Kumpiene, G. (2014). Language brokering and self-concept. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 36(2), 124–143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739986314524166>
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Omori, K., & Kishimoto, K. (2019). The impact of language brokering on Hmong college students’ parent-child relationship and academic persistence. *Hmong Studies Journal*, 20, 1–43. <https://www.hmongstudiesjournal.org/uploads/4/5/8/7/4587788/omoriandkishimotohsj20.pdf>
- Rainey, V., Flores, V., Morrison, R., David, E., & Silton, R. (2014). Mental health risk factors associated with childhood language brokering. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 35(5), 463–478. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2013.870180>
- Robertson, Z., Wilding, R., & Gifford, S. (2016). Mediating the family imaginary: Young people negotiating absence in transnational refugee families. *Global Networks*, 16(2), 219–236. <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12111>
- Roche, K. M., Lambert, S. F., Ghazarian, S. R., & Little, T. D. (2014). Adolescent language brokering in diverse contexts: Associations with parenting and parent-youth relationships in a new immigrant destination area. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 44(1), 77–89. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-014-0154-3>
- Shen, Y., Tilton, K. E., & Kim, S. Y. (2018). Outcomes of language brokering, mediators and moderators: A systematic review. In R. Weisskirch (Ed.), *Language brokering in immigrant families: Theories and contexts* (pp. 47–71). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315644714-4>

- Spivey, S. E., & Lewis, D. C. (2015). Harvesting from a repotted plant: A qualitative study of Karen refugees' resettlement and foodways. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 29(1), 60–81. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fev013>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2016). *Connecting refugees: How Internet and mobile connectivity can improve refugee well-being and transform humanitarian action*.
- Vertovec, S. (2004). Cheap calls: The social glue of migrant transnationalism. *Global Networks*, 4(2), 219–224. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2004.00088.x>
- Vertovec, S. (2009). *Transnationalism*. Routledge.
- Waldinger, R. (2013). Immigrant transnationalism. *Current Sociology*, 61(5–6), 756–777. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392113498692>
- Wilding, R. (2018). *Families, intimacy and globalization: Floating ties*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Williams, D. (2012). Changing Burma from without: Political activism among the Burmese diaspora. *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*, 19(1), 121–142. <https://doi.org/10.2979/indjglolegstu.19.1.121>

### Author Biography

Shane Worrell is a research officer at La Trobe University's Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS). He completed PhD research in sociology in La Trobe's Department of Social Inquiry in 2020, focusing on humanitarian migration and the use of social media.