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Reimagining Global HRM in the Age of Fragmented Globalization: Psychological Belonging through Virtual, Transnational Social Spaces

Abstract:

Today's fragmented and regionally contested globalization presents challenges for multinational enterprises (MNEs) striving to maintain organizational cohesion and foster interpersonal connections across dispersed geographies. The normalization of virtual work further complicates MNEs' efforts by disrupting traditional community-building mechanisms, increasing risks of social isolation and disconnection among globally distributed employees. In this context, Human Resource Management (HRM) must be reimagined – not merely as a functional support role, but as a strategic facilitator of transnational connectivity and psychological belonging. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and insights from 47 interviewees across diverse MNEs, our reflexive thematic analysis reveals how unmet psychological needs, especially relatedness, can undermine cohesion and organizational commitment in global virtual environments. In response, we propose an alternative HRM strategy grounded in the concept of Transnational Social Spaces (TSS) and Transnational Community (TC), which challenge the assumption that meaningful social connections are bound by geographic proximity. By integrating SDT's psychological micro-foundations with relational infrastructures embedded in TSS/TC, organizations can reconstitute virtual workplaces as inclusive and participatory transnational communities. Our study is among the first to bridge SDT with TSS/TC, positioning HRM not as an administrative function, but as a transnational connector fostering belonging and connectedness in a fragmented world.

Key words: *Virtual Workspaces, Transnational Communities, Self-Determination Theory, Psychological Needs, Interpersonal Connection, Belonging, Relational Infrastructure, Multinational HRM.*

INTRODUCTION

The global business landscape is increasingly fractured, as technological advancements intersect with rising nationalism, regionalization, and geopolitical tensions, collectively disrupting conventional models of international operations and management (Tung, 2024; Buckley, 2025). In this evolving and inward-turning context, MNEs face growing pressure not only to sustain global business continuity but also to preserve organizational connectedness and cohesion across geopolitically fragmented environments (Luo & Van Assche, 2023; Moura et al., 2025). Among various strategic responses, the shift from physical to virtual work arrangements has become as a necessary adaptation (Antràs, 2020; Buckley, 2023). By leveraging digitally mediated communication and real-time connection, virtual work enables MNEs to sustain intra- and international business continuity while navigating growing spatial, temporal, and socio-cultural distances (George & Schillebeeckx, 2022; Lazarova et al., 2023). Hence, virtual work is no longer a temporary or project-based; it has become a defining and enduring feature of global work (Blay & Froese, 2022; Lynden, 2024; Froese et al., 2025).

While virtual work offers flexibility and operational continuity across borders, they have upended traditional workplace dynamics by reducing social cues, diminishing in-person interactions – essential elements to maintaining the workplace social fabric (Shaik et al., 2021; Ugar, 2023). As most professional interactions occur via screens with colleagues who are rarely, if ever, met in person, opportunities for informal and spontaneous interactions and interpersonal relationship building have become limited (Hinds & Cramton, 2014; Mahadevan et al., 2024). Many employees experience a diminished sense of belonging and relational dissatisfaction when physically disconnected from their teams and broader organization entities (McCarthy et al., 2025; Urrila et al., 2025). These relational deficits are not merely individual nor peripheral concerns. They challenge the maintenance of core organizational functions, such as

collaboration, knowledge exchange, trust formation, and threaten cohesiveness across globally distributed workforces (S. K. Johnson et al., 2009; Collins et al., 2017; Asatiani et al., 2021).

This reality underscores the need for organizations to reimagine strategies and move beyond conventional assumptions and approaches tied to co-located work models. More specifically, HRM functions must reconsider their roles and redesign HR approaches to effectively realign the demands of operational processes and interpersonal relationships within transnational virtual work contexts (Donnelly & Johns, 2021; Urrila et al., 2025). Here, we argue that while solutions such as revamping individual coping strategies, job (re)design, and organizational interventions offer value (e.g., Nurmi & Hinds, 2020; Becker et al., 2022; Cho et al., 2024), they often overlook a critical foundation: a grounded understanding of employees' psychological needs. Accordingly, they do not consider how these needs can be fulfilled in virtual, transnational work contexts, where avenues for social interaction, relational bonding, and resource sharing are disrupted and restructured (cf. Donnelly & Johns, 2021; Lauring et al., 2024).

To this end, we integrate Self-Determination Theory (SDT) with the concepts of Transnational Social Spaces (TSS) and Transnational Communities (TC) to frame our study. SDT offers a strong psychological foundation by emphasizing the importance of fulfilling employees' autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs as drivers of motivation, performance, and wellness (Deci et al., 2017; Gagné et al., 2022; Slemp et al., 2024). This perspective views employees not as isolated workers but as individuals with an inherent human desire to form meaningful connections with co-workers and the broader organization (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018; McCarthy et al., 2025). It reflects an understanding of the psychological need for belonging as a core aspect of the employee experience (Urrila et al., 2025).

Though valuable, SDT alone falls short in addressing how these needs are fulfilled in virtual, globally dispersed contexts. This prompts us to draw on TSS and TC from transnationalism scholarship as complementary frameworks. TSS and TC challenge the assumption that social connections are solely contingent on physical proximity and space (Kivisto, 2003; Pries, 2005; Faist, 2015). TSS and TC reconceptualize MNEs as transnational actors embedded in, and shaped by, multiple overlapping institutional and social contexts, rather than as top-down, nationally rooted entities (G. Morgan, 2001; Dörrenbächer, 2007). Within this view, symbolic and digitally mediated practices – such as shared norms, routines, narratives, interactions, and support – can function as vehicles for sustaining connection and belonging across spatial divides (cf. Pries, 2005, 2008). Together, SDT and TSS/TC offer a multidimensional framework to examine how psychological needs are socially shaped and fulfilled in transnational virtual work.

However, empirical insights into how these dynamics are enacted in practice remain limited. Therefore, we embarked on an empirical study guided by the following research question: *"How can the concept of transnational social spaces and communities be leveraged to foster psychological belonging among globally dispersed virtual employees?"* We conducted a qualitative study involving 52 semi-structured interviews with 47 employees working across multiple MNEs and industries. Using reflexive thematic analysis to move between data and theory, we provided insights into how employees experience psychological (dis)connectedness in varying virtual contexts, how relational dynamics are shaped or disrupted by spatial, cultural, and organizational distances, and how transnational and social ties can be built in the absence of physical proximity.

Our contributions are twofold. *First*, we reconceptualize psychological needs as socially contingent rather than solely individual matter. Building on this, we propose the model of relational infrastructure: organizationally embedded, socially co-constructed connections.

This model offers a foundation to rethink the complexities of interconnections within MNEs and across boundaries. *Second*, drawing on the logic of transnational social space and community, we reframe HRM as a strategic actor and transnational community orchestrator, shifting its role from managing tasks and employees to facilitating spaces and communities that foster psychological belonging in globally distributed workforces.

In the next section, we review key literature on virtual work, psychological belonging and transnational social spaces through the SDT, TSS/TC lenses. We present our methodology and main themes emerging from the empirical data. We then discuss theoretical and practical contributions and propose three ways to advance the research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In response to the pressures of fragmented globalization and the virtualization of global work, MNEs face a growing challenge: how to sustain organizational cohesion and belonging among dispersed employees. While technology enables cross-border collaboration, it often erodes the informal, relational dynamics that once underpinned employee engagement and community in global organizations. As such, the question of how workers experience connection, meaning, and psychological integration has become increasingly salient. Addressing this challenge requires multiple lenses. Therefore, this literature review synthesizes three relevant bodies of work: first, the characteristics and implications of virtual work; second, the psychological foundations of employee motivation and belonging (drawing on SDT); and third, the TSS/TC perspective for building connection and cohesion in transnational organizational contexts.

Virtual Work

Varying Forms of Virtual Work

Definitions on virtual work are varied and numerous (Raghuram et al., 2019). The term encompasses a broad and diverse set of work arrangements and interaction modes, including

tele(communicating) work, remote work, flexible work, virtual work, hybrid work, smart work, digitally-enabled work, among others (Selmer et al., 2022; Hill et al., 2024; Froese et al., 2025). A common feature of virtual work is the use of technology to facilitate interpersonal interactions and bridge varying degrees of geographical distance (Raghuram et al., 2019; Blay & Froese, 2022). In practices, virtual work can occur across national and cultural contexts or within the same organization or country. It is no longer confined to niche project-based, virtual team members as originally conceived (see Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Gilson et al., 2015). Today, virtual work has become a routine and integral part of working norms and environments (Lynden, 2024; Mahadevan et al., 2024).

To capture the full spectrum of virtual work and for the purpose of this study, we adopt Makarius and Larson's (2017, p. 160) definition, which conceptualizes virtuality as *"the extent to which individuals use technology to interact with others, share ideas and information, and execute work."* Though this framing moves beyond the early definition put forth by Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999), we believe it reflects better the evolving and multifaceted nature of virtual work. Table 1 outlines key characteristics that differentiate various forms of virtual work.

***** Table 1 about here *****

By employing this wide spectrum, we can contextualize and derive more nuanced insights into their varied impacts. Clearly, the experiences and impacts of virtual work are not uniform across all workers (A. Johnson et al., 2020; Wheatley et al., 2021). Take the relational dimension as an example. An employee who engages in virtual work as part of a routine may have different experience from that of a fully virtual worker, such as a digital nomad or freelancer (cf. Urrila et al., 2025). While the former retains the option of co-location and in-person connection with colleagues when needed, the latter may lack access and/or opportunities for such in-person social connection. Likewise, virtual collaboration with local colleagues who

share the same linguistic and cultural background presents different challenges compared to working in global virtual teams, where intercultural complexities and potential misunderstandings are more likely to arise (Hinds et al., 2011; Asatiani et al., 2021).

Impacts of Virtual Work

The impacts are mixed in the literature (A. Johnson et al., 2020; Wheatley et al., 2021; Hill et al., 2024). On the positive side, virtual work arrangements allow employees to have control over their schedules, and freedom to decide and switch when and where to work, and how they complete their work (Bentley et al., 2016; Daniel et al., 2018; Lauring & Jonasson, 2024). This autonomy allows them to pursue boundaryless careers and better integrate work and non-work responsibilities, often contributing to a greater sense of fulfilment (A. Johnson et al., 2020; Froese et al., 2025).

On the negative side, extended periods of virtual work without adequate face-to-face interactions can give rise to a wide range of relational, emotional, psychological issues (S. K. Johnson et al., 2009; Becker et al., 2022; Hill et al., 2024). Virtual work often makes it more difficult to form and sustain meaningful relationships with colleagues. Developing high-quality social interactions typically requires time, attention, and effort (Walz et al., 2023). However, in virtual settings, spontaneous encounters are frequently replaced by scheduled, task-oriented meetings. Over time, this "out-of-sight, out-of-mind" dynamic attributes to weaker social ties and a growing sense of disconnection from coworkers and organisations (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018; Ugar, 2023).

Feelings of isolation, loneliness, and exclusion do not only negatively impact employees' overall work and life satisfaction and well-being (Becker et al., 2022; Hill et al., 2024; McCarthy et al., 2025), but also has far-reaching consequences for organizations. Research shows that individuals who work remotely do not have sufficient access to people and

information and (in)formal growth opportunities (Cooper & Kurland, 2002; Charalampous et al., 2019). When employees feel isolated or disconnected, they are less inclined to share (or contribute) ideas, nor actively collaborate on projects, nor enthusiastically engage in virtual brainstorming sessions (Collins et al., 2017; C. Lim et al., 2025). Such attitudes towards collaboration and creativity within teams can hinder organizational innovation (Richter et al., 2021; Rios-Ballesteros & Fuerst, 2022). Furthermore, the sharing of tacit knowledge, typically transmitted through situated, informal networks, tends to be inadequate in the digitally mediated environments (Hinds & Cramton, 2014; Mahadevan et al., 2024).

These issues arising from virtual work signal the underlying misalignment between digitally mediated forms of work and the fulfillment of employees' psychological needs. This leads us to the next question: what drives people at work? In the following section, we draw on SDT to explore the core psychological needs that shape employees' motivation and wellness in organizational life.

Employees' Psychological Needs via the SDT lens

Deci and Ryan's (1985, 2000) SDT posits that satisfying three micro-foundational psychosocial needs for *autonomy, competence, and relatedness* is essential for effective functioning and wellness. The need for autonomy aligns closely with the concept of individual agency, suggesting that individuals generally seek to act with volition, exercising free will and making choices for themselves (Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Slemp et al., 2024). Similarly, the need for competence reflects the agency-structure dynamic, representing individuals' desire to feel effective and capable in navigating and influencing their environment (Gagné et al., 2022). The need for relatedness underscores the importance of possessing meaningful social connections (Deci et al., 2017; Slemp et al., 2024). As social beings, individuals are not wholly independent and autonomous but interdependent in their relationships with others and the social contexts in which they operate (Barnes, 2000; Burkitt, 2016). In organizational settings, this

interdependence is evident in the reliance on interpersonal connections and supportive behaviors necessary for effective team functioning (Lauring et al., 2024; Slemp et al., 2024).

Though SDT does not explicitly conceptualize belonging, its emphasis on relatedness aligns closely with the broader notion of psychological belonging, understood as universal human desire to form meaningful, reciprocal relationships and to feel accepted and valued within a group or environment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992; Allen et al., 2022). For many, workplaces not simply sites of economic production or labor exchanges but spaces for building relationships, seeking validation, and constructing social identity (Giddens & Sutton, 2011; Vaara et al., 2021). Psychological belonging at work is gratified only when individuals experience satisfactory workplace relationships. That is, when the expected and actual quality and quantity of interpersonal connections are aligned (Urrila et al., 2025) and when individuals get involved in shared activities and collective meaning-making (Filstad et al., 2019; O'Malley & Baker, 2020).

In virtual work environments, where physical interactions are mediated through screens, psychological belonging hinges on deliberate efforts to establish supportive structures, foster inclusive practices, and address diverse individual needs. Creating such work conditions "is not only an appropriate end in itself but will lead to more employee satisfaction and thriving, as well as collateral benefits for organizational effectiveness" (Deci et al., 2017, p. 20). Resistance to forced remote work during Covid-19 and rigid return-to-office mandates exemplifies a natural opposition to top-down controls that clash with employees' psychological needs (Georgiadou et al., 2024; Urrila et al., 2025). These pushbacks also signal a growing need for organizations to abandon imposed, hierarchical models (cf. Asatiani et al., 2021). We then turn to transnational social spaces and community-oriented concepts to explore how firms can better engage employees and foster changes aligned with their psychological needs.

Transnational Social Spaces and Transnational Communities in the MNE: A Lens for Fostering Psychological Belonging

In response to the fragmented and increasingly regional character of globalization, there has been renewed interest in how MNEs can create a sense of belonging and identification that transcends national boundaries. One conceptual approach that offers promise in this regard is the transnational social space (TSS) perspective, alongside the related notion of transnational communities (TCs). Originating in migration studies (see Schiller et al., 1995; Pries, 2005), the TSS concept captures the dense, durable, and relational networks that span national borders. It emphasizes *"the cultural, economic, and political linking of people and institutions [that] de-emphasizes the role of geography in the formation of identity and collectivity and creates new possibilities for membership across boundaries"* (Pries, 2005, p. 169).

Applied to MNEs, TSS emphasizes firms are not merely operating *across* geographies, but also helping to *constitute* new social spaces that can become meaningful to individuals embedded within them (Pries, 2008; Djelic & Quack, 2010, 2018). The TSS perspective challenges conventional notions of the MNE as a top-down, nationally anchored entity, instead portraying it as an actor embedded within, and shaped by, multiple overlapping institutional and social contexts (G. Morgan, 2001; Dörrenbächer, 2007). Within these spaces, transnational communities form as shared understandings, identities, and practices emerge among actors from diverse national backgrounds. These communities are not confined by formal organizational structures or national institutions, but instead operate through shared goals, norms, and symbolic repertoires (Moore, 2004; Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006).

Importantly for the HRM agenda, these TCs within TSSs may serve as a valuable mechanism through which MNEs foster *relatedness and psychological belonging* among employees and collaborators. As Pries (2008) and others have argued, the trust, mutual commitment, and informal interactions within these communities can serve as the glue that

binds geographically dispersed actors to the MNE, not through hierarchy or formal control, but through identification with shared meanings and relational embeddedness (Asatiani et al., 2021). This dynamic becomes particularly salient in contexts of virtual and fragmented globalization, where national identification may strengthen. As such, the MNE must actively construct a supranational social identity and virtual transnational spaces that enable meaningful connections, shared understanding and connection across boundaries.

Research on MNEs within TSSs has, however, highlighted these spaces are not purely benevolent or stable. Rather, they are often contested, transient, and unevenly structured (Dörrenbächer, 2007; Buzdugan et al., 2025). This underscores the strategic HRM opportunity and challenge: how to devise HR strategies and approaches that engage with and shape these emerging communities to support psychological belonging, while also being mindful of the symbolic tensions they may entail.

METHODS

Research Approach

As we are seeking to understand the impacts of virtual work conditions on globally dispersed employees' psychological needs and how these can be addressed through the TSS/TC concept, we considered an individual-level, interpretative approach most appropriate (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018; W. M. Lim, 2025). This qualitative approach allows us to gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding "from the point of view of those being studied" (Bryman, 1990, p. 46). A qualitative study, with its openness to diverse perspectives, enables us to contextualize real-life viewpoints, while attending to the complexities and richness of interpretation and meaning-making (Bansal et al., 2018; Welch et al., 2022).

Furthermore, this qualitative approach enabled an iterative and reflexive process, allowing us to continuously refine our understanding by moving back and forth between data

collection, analysis, and literature review, to gain richer and more grounded insights (D. L. Morgan & Nica, 2020; W. M. Lim, 2025). As an example, our initial analysis revealed a strong theme around employees' unmet psychological needs. However, further engagement with the literature led us to identify the TSS/TC framework as a valuable lens for MNEs to rethink HRM strategies in today's complex global work environment. We argue that a rigid hypothesis-testing approach would have been inadequate, not only in capturing the nuanced and multifaceted nature of these findings, but also in uncovering relevant theoretical perspectives that enrich and deepen our understanding (Silverman, 2013; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018).

Data Collection

Drawing on personal networks and referrals from research participants, between December 2023 to February 2025, the first author selected 47 informants and conducted 52 semi-structured interviews with individuals who have varying experiences in virtual work. At the time of interviewing, 34 were employed by MNEs and 13 by locally owned enterprises. Yet, all informants had prior experience working for MNEs across a range of industries, such as automobile, education, finance, energy, healthcare, construction, technology, consultancy, and fashion. Informants were from diverse age groups, nationalities, and professional backgrounds (see Table 2 & 3). The aim of selecting a diverse group of informants is to ensure heterogeneity and richness in the data, which are critical for generating insights (Patton, 2002; Denzin, 2012).

***** Table 2 & 3 about here *****

As the study involves human participants, we have adhered to the ethical principles set by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK[i]) to uphold research ethics and safeguard informants' rights (Räsänen & Moore, 2016; Ausloos & Veale, 2019). All participants received a research overview and privacy notice outlining the study's purpose and explaining how their data would be handled, particularly in cases where personal or

sensitive information might be disclosed during interviews. By return, participants provided signed consent for data collection and use.

For data collection, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews. The primary aim of the interviews was to explore participants' overall work experiences and their sense of belonging in their professional settings (see Appendix 1 for the interview questions). Although virtual work was not the central focus of the interview at the outset, many informants reflected on how virtual working arrangements, often intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, disrupted their social interactions, work dynamics, and psychological connection to their co-workers and organizations. These spontaneous insights led us to further probe the implications of virtual work, particularly in relation to psychological belonging in virtual spaces. Thus, our analysis was refined iteratively, guided by emergent patterns in the data and supported by relevant theoretical frameworks of SDT and TSS/TC thinking.

Data Analysis

We employed reflexive thematic analysis advocated by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2023) to identify themes from raw data. Reflexive approach allows us to acknowledge our beliefs, assumptions, and cultural positioning (as the researchers) may influence the meaning-making process and interpretation outcomes (Finlay, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2019; Guttormsen & Moore, 2023). The self-awareness and constant reflection on the researchers' own biases and taken-for-granted perspectives are important for knowledge generation in the qualitative inquiry (Berger, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2023). In this study, although all authors are not fully globally distributed employees, the experience of working virtually and being physically disconnected from colleagues during and after the COVID-19 pandemic gave us personal insights. Furthermore, the first author's prior experience working in an MNE and involved in virtual, global projects further informed the reflexive and interpretive lens of this study. The findings thus reflect a co-construction of meaning between researchers and informants.

The dataset, comprising 52 verbatim-transcribed interviews, was analyzed manually and through NVivo software. Analysis began during data collection (Phase 1), as the first author actively took notes during the interviews to capture interesting viewpoints and collect real-time follow-up information. These notes later served as reflexive aids, supporting analytical quality and transparency (Shufutinsky, 2020). In Phase 2, the first author repeatedly reviewed transcripts, highlighting key text and annotating them with analytic questions. Phase 3 involved iterative coding in NVivo, with codes continuously refined to capture alternative interpretations (Locke et al., 2022), until coherent, unifying themes emerged as cohesive, interpretative "stories" (Braun & Clarke, 2023). In Phase 4, the research team collaboratively engaged with literature to contextualize themes, evaluate theoretical relevance, and refine the connection between emergent themes and theoretical frameworks. Phase 5 entailed abductive reasoning and reflection, where the team iteratively reexamined the surprising findings in consideration of broader conceptual insights. This stage was critical for building the data-theory links and expanding existing theoretical armchairs (cf. Silverman, 2013; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). Figure 1 presents the data structure and showcase key themes identified from the raw data.

***** Figure 1 about here *****

FINDINGS

Impacts of Virtual Work on Employee's Psychological Needs

The Disruption of Sociality and Psychological Belonging by Virtual Work

Informants voiced their concerns over the disintegration of everyday sociality during their time working entirely virtually. In line with Lehmann-Willenbrock's (2024) arguments, most informants considered workplaces are not merely functional spaces but as venues for interpersonal connection, community building, and identity affirmation.

The virtual work setups, however, strip away these elements. Many found it challenging to connect and build relationships through cameras or screens alone. This was particularly challenging when co-workers chose to mute themselves or turn off their cameras during meetings, making relation and connection truly difficult. Consequently, many informants expressed missing casual moments, such as coffee breaks, hallway chats, spontaneous interactions, which had previously sustained workplace relationships.

All informants considered that digital platforms like Zoom, Teams, and shared work applications, while useful for task coordination from afar, they were purely transactional and insufficient for building relationships. According to the informants, digitally mediated interactions lacked the depth, spontaneity, and emotional resonance of in-person interactions. The persistent feeling of "not-being-on-the-same-page" made it difficult to develop team cohesion or to feel integrated.

The consequences of relational disruptions were particularly acute among minoritized groups, such as new joiners or individuals with "different expectations and norms about interactions and relationships in the workplace" (Hinds et al., 2011, p. 166). For instance, Marta (P.20) had had to quit her job just a few months after joining the organization due to constant feelings of social disconnection. Others also echoed similar struggles in such environments, citing a lack of clarity and transparency around the organization's shared vision and purpose, as well as the organizational decision-making processes.

These challenges were not limited to employees. Leaders of globally dispersed teams, such as Mark (P.39), Tiger (P.45) and Bruce (P.35), also reported difficulties in building meaningful connections with remote team members. Bridging temporal, linguistic, and cultural gaps demands invested efforts. Yet, digital platforms alone were insufficiently equipped to accomplish this, as Bruce (P.35) reflected:

"I'm just thinking through my employees and what I know about them at the moment. I think the employees that I work with in the office in London, for example, I think it's a bit easier because [I] spend a lot of time with them. The employees I manage remotely, it's a bit more difficult. You know, you don't have... you're not part of the [team physically]... you don't go and get a coffee together at the coffee machine. You know, when I'm speaking with them, it tends to be work-related, or the majority of it is work related. You know, you don't have the social opportunities to go out and say, invite your partners, if you have a partner… or do a family day and bring your children, if you have children…"

The lack of social life and interactions and relational constraints, in many ways, disrupted employees' a sense of shared belongingness. Belonging at work, as articulated by Robert (P.41), is:

"…feeling part of a community, feeling at home, like to be where you can be yourself, and where people want to work with you and you want to work with other people, so like a real community team spirit environment…"

Since virtual spaces were often used for task-related interactions, they diminished this much-needed sense of community and team spirit. When communication became work-driven, opportunities to connect beyond professional layers were reduced. As a result, employees began to feel isolated in the digital workplace: present virtually but psychologically disconnected. Although none of the informants reported difficulties in completing tasks from a distance, the absence of social glue became as an acute issue. It hindered the formation of interpersonal understanding, trust, and mutual support (Becker et al., 2022). Over time, these unmet psychological needs have accumulated, leading to decreased engagement, a weakened sense of belonging, and reduced commitment, to varying degrees.

Micro-foundation Psychological Needs at Work

Though virtual work fell short on the relatedness dimension, none of the participants expressed a desire to return to previous fully co-located work models, either. Rather, they still valued the autonomy and flexibility that virtual work provided. For instance, Alex (P.19), Sydney (P.9),

and Julia (P.13) appreciated having the "home-office" option, as it allowed them to relocate with their beloved ones and care for their children without encountering any work-related interruptions.

Sustaining autonomy and competence at work was important to many. It was about having the possibility to organize work at their own place and pace and deliver outcomes independently while balancing other responsibilities. Yet rather than working entirely remotely and in isolation, informants consistently expressed a clear preference for a "best-of-both-worlds" approach: working remotely when needed while engaging in in-person interactions whenever possible. This hybrid option offered a strong sense of ownership over their tasks while keeping them connected with co-workers, as Louis (P.44) explained:

> *"I'm working a lot at home now since the COVID. We have the possibility to work four days a week at home, remotely. So, we meet, but what is important is to meet at least one time per week... Because I'm living alone, it's good also to see people at work, and sometimes not only from my department, but from other departments…"*

Socialization at work was not merely for work purposes. As per Louis's accounts, informal meetups helped him feel connected to co-workers and the organization, while also easing feelings of loneliness. Nevertheless, physical co-presence became valuable and meaningful only when others could be present and when informal, organic interactions could occur. Many informants, such as Julio (P.33) and Sydney (P.9), shared that such options were impossible as their co-workers were dispersed across the globe.

The Need to Reimagine HRM Strategies and Practices

Organic Social Interactions Shaping Psychological Belonging

As social beings, individuals hold a fundamental need for relating to and connecting with others meaningfully (Burkitt, 2016; Allen et al., 2022). Accordingly, many informants considered

interpersonal connection was critical and it should extend beyond task-related, transactional exchanges. Marta (P.20) stated:

> *"I want to connect on another level than only work. I think, to me, work is important also for my social life. It's not that I go to work and say like "who wants to be my friend..." But of course, I am also looking for social connections at work…"*

Work was not solely about fulfilling job responsibilities. Rather, it formed a significant part of employees' social and emotional life. For those with limited social networks and duties outside of work, the workplace became a source of building social interaction and connection. Therefore, when social interactions were limited to functional duties, work became emotionally unfulfilling, and the broader meaning of work may lose its significance and substance (Ugar, 2023).

Interestingly, what truly connected people at work was organic social interactions, not formalized corporate events. Many informants emphasized the value of having person-oriented one-on-one check-ins and (in)formal spaces for engaging in non-work-related social practices. Informal activities, like coffee catchups, spontaneous discussions, shared lunch time, and after-work socialization, became practical and symbolic acts for building trust, connection, and a shared sense of togetherness. These unstructured social, relational exchanges were more powerful for relationship-building than structural, top-down and formal events. Here, we quote Peter's (P.32) and Tina's (P.16) accounts as illustrators; however, this insight resonates broadly and consistently across the dataset.

> *"… a lot of the institutional things … that organizations think they have to do, like these retreats or team building or all this type of stuff, it's often very inauthentic, or it's very formulaic, forced, something that organizations feel they have to do. And to me, it's not very authentic… To me, those types of interactions happen between individuals or between groups within a workspace, but it happens more organically, rather than, "okay, team, everybody, let's all share something, and then we're going to go and play sports*

together, and we'll build our good relationship that way". That's a very contrived way of doing things, which I don't [like]. It makes me feel uncomfortable…" - Peter's (P.32)

" [The MNE] have... all of the webcast, the town hall, and sometimes VP [Vice President] visit, the EVP [Executive Vice President] visit. They always have this kind of... sometimes one-to-one session or sometimes it's a group meeting… When you have a one-to-one session with her [the line manager], you cannot sense her focus, actually. Even during that half an hour, she's not purely on you. She's sometimes busy with her phone, busy replying messages. So, the feeling is not that nice. You feel like "oh my topic or my thing is not important to you."… - Tina's (P.16)

Like Peter and Tina, many informants preferred spaces where workplace hierarchies were temporarily relaxed, and informal, human-to-human interactions could take place. Such settings enabled more open, candid, and person-oriented communication, which served as the essential glue that binds people together and fosters a shared sense of belonging (Filstad et al., 2019; Urrila et al., 2025). Tiger (P.45), Ahmed (P.28), and Jim (P.29) reflected that the organic "we-time" outside work provided more valuable information and a better sense of interpersonal connections than what could be done through regular office hours.

The Need for a New Relational Organizational Infrastructure

Organic interaction and socialization are paramount to building shared belongingness. However, in practice, all informants were aware that such opportunities would be scarce, or even impossible, in contexts where co-workers did not go to office regularly and where team members were globally distributed. Moreover, employees may have different needs and preferences when it comes to connecting with others. For instance, Jane (P.11), Pablo (P.36), and Charlie (P.46), clearly distinguished between their professional and personal lives. They expressed no desire for deeper interpersonal connections outside work. They stated that as long as they could maintain a workable relationship with co-workers, that was sufficient for them.

Together, these insights underscore the need for a new kind of organizational infrastructure: the one that is built on organic interaction, shared meaning, relational density, and sensitivity to diverse psychological needs, rather than on formalized regulations and practices. Such infrastructure not only bridges geographic dispersion but also accommodates individuals' varying preferences for interpersonal connection.

To create and sustain such infrastructure is not a "one-man-job," as Sydney (P.9) opined. It requires orchestration across multiple levels of the organization. As organizational relationships evolve and expand transnationally, we align with Donnelly and Johns (2021, p. 99) that "HRM expertise will be essential in negotiating the variety of different regulatory and institutional settings in which digital remote work is occurring."

In the next session, we synthesize our empirical findings with the theoretical frameworks and discuss how HRM can best orchestrate and shift toward building relational infrastructures to foster genuine interpersonal connections and shared belongingness across borders.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical and empirical insights from our study suggest that virtual work functions as a transnational connector, rather than a divider. It enables collaborative continuity across political, cultural, and national divides (Donnelly & Johns, 2021; Lauring et al., 2024). It also supports employees' psychological needs for autonomy and competence by offering greater flexibility and task ownership (Lauring & Jonasson, 2024; Urrila et al., 2025). However, our empirical evidence shows that what remains absent in many virtual environments is not structural capacity but relational infrastructure. There is a lack of intentional spaces and practices for informal, bottom-up interactions through which employees can co-create a sense of community and belonging.

To fulfill these micro-foundation psychological needs of globally distributed workforce, we argue that MNEs must act as architects and HRM as orchestrators of transnational communities (cf. Pries, 2005; Faist, 2015). Transnational communities, bound by shared values and affective ties rather than geography (Kivisto, 2003), provide a strong foundation for building relational infrastructures that foster psychological belonging across borders.

Theoretical Contributions

Our study advances theoretical understanding in two main ways, as discussed below.

Reimagining Organizational Infrastructure through a Relational Lens

Building on our insights, we develop a model of *relational infrastructures* (Figure 2) to capture the complexities of workspace interactions within the MNE amid fragmented globalization and virtuality.

***** Figure 2 about here *****

Using this model, we demonstrate that transnational and virtual spaces are not mere supplements to location-bound workplaces. Instead, they become active components that reshape the very foundations of organizational membership (cf. Lauring et al., 2024). Digitally mediated interactions dissolve spatial and temporal boundaries, enabling new and intricate forms of connection between employees and locations (Asatiani et al., 2021; Donnelly & Johns, 2021). This perspective challenges the traditional view of MNEs as primarily structured through hierarchical and intra-organizational divides, between headquarters and subsidiaries, between functional silos, and across organizational levels (see Vaara et al., 2021).

As global work increasingly shifts to virtual environments, employees are embedded within even more complex webs of interactions, with enduring psychological needs for connection and belonging (Urrila et al., 2025). Yet, fulfilling these needs, especially relatedness and psychological belonging, is more challenging in virtual spaces where face-to-face

interaction and interpersonal support are reduced and placed behind screens. Consequently, the satisfaction of these needs is not individually driven but socially contingent on the relational infrastructures that virtual environments enable or constrain. Within such infrastructures, multiple actors are empowered to co-create and engage in shared symbols, routines, values, and community-like practices. In this sense, relatedness and psychological belonging is not pre-given but actively co-constructed through the development of shared routines, mental models, and sustained relational engagement (cf. Asatiani et al., 2021).

To build relational infrastructures and reconstruct virtual workspaces as inclusive, participatory communities, MNEs must break free from entrenched, nationally anchored, location-bound frameworks and reconceptualize their infrastructure as dynamic, fluid, and border-transcending social fields, operating on a logic of community (Faist, 2010, 2015; Georgiou & Arenas, 2023). Only through such a shift can MNEs meaningfully strengthen organizational cohesion across dispersed and diverse workforces.

Reimagining HRM as a Strategic Actor and Orchestrator of Transnational Communities

In addition to the shift toward more relational organizational infrastructures, we call for a reimagining of HRM beyond its traditional administrative functions. Consistent with Boxall's (2018) and Burke and Morley's (2023), we argue that HRM should not be limited to hiring, training, and retention but should act as a strategic partner and transnational orchestrator attuned to the emerging realities of virtual, global work. Rather than relying on top-down hierarchical mechanisms, HRM must evolve to become a strategic actor and people connector across borders.

To reimagine its strategies and approaches, HRM can draw a community logic of organizing (cf. Georgiou & Arenas, 2023), creating conditions that enable community-driven practices to emerge organically. Rather than imposing standardized, top-down policies that

diminish employee autonomy (Georgiadou et al., 2024), HR should act as an enabler and orchestrator: supporting informal communication, interpersonal connection, and relational trust in transnational virtual spaces.

This involves co-constructing symbolic and pragmatic routines that legitimize non-task-related interactions and provide space for personal check-ins and relational engagement. By modeling inclusive, relational norms, HR can help establish a culture of informal support and care. Over time, such micro-level practices can crystallize into shared expectations that sustain bottom-up, transnational community-building. Essentially, HR should not position itself as a manager of connection, but as a *transnational relational orchestrator*: the one that facilitates the organic growth of human relationships and reconfigure virtual workspaces into inclusive, participatory communities.

Practical Implications

Our findings invite organizations and leaders to reconsider how virtual work and interpersonal connections are structured in transnational, digitally mediated spaces. To restore the relational depth and symbolic meaning often diminished in virtual contexts (Donnelly & Johns, 2021), rigid hierarchies and place-based routines should give way to people-oriented, organic, and trust-based forms of interaction.

Furthermore, in line with the spirit of community, we advocate for employees to actively co-design the form, rhythm, and intent of both task-related and social exchanges. Rather than directing these interactions, HRM and decision-makers should cultivate environments where informal, organic human connections can emerge safely and free from professional repercussions. Such an approach aligns with the autonomy-driven, bottom-up, and community-centered logic inherent in SDT and TSS/TC. This implies that meaningful human connection in transnational virtual workspaces can only be sustained when grounded in individuals'

psychological needs and actively enacted by empowered employees within supportive relational infrastructures.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers empirical insights into relational and psychological need disruptions in transnational virtual work, several limitations remain. *First*, the data comprises employees from diverse MNEs with varying virtual work experiences. Although this diversity offers rich insights, it may blur important distinctions between worker groups, such as remote employees, digital nomads, and hybrid workers. Future research should explore how relational dynamics differ across occupational roles, organizational hierarchies, and broader socio-cultural or power-laden contexts. In addition, incorporating perspectives from HR professionals or employers could help balance employee accounts and generate more multilevel insights.

Second, as the data reflect interviewees' perceptions at a single point in time, the study cannot capture how relational needs and experiences evolve, and how they shape individual's psychological belonging. Longitudinal research is valuable to examine these dynamics over time and assess sustained relational engagement.

Third, instead of employing interview-based approaches, future studies should consider participant observation and intervention-oriented studies. For example, experimental interventions could assess the impact of specific TSS/TC practices on employee autonomy, relatedness, trust, well-being, and collaboration. Such approaches would offer actionable, evidence-based insights into how relational infrastructures can be intentionally designed and sustained in virtual transnational settings.

CONLUSION

In an era characterized by rising multipolarity, fragmentation, and social disconnection (Allen et al., 2022; Bishen, 2023; Kaya, 2025), virtual work has increasingly transcended all national,

regional, global, and physical-digital boundaries (Georgiadou et al., 2024; Froese et al., 2025). Drawing on SDT and TSS/TC and insights from employees engaged in virtual, global work, this study provides empirical evidence of the unfulfilled psychological needs of globally distributed employees. Our findings underscore the urgent need for MNEs and HRM to reimagine their strategies by prioritizing relational infrastructures: developing systems, spaces, and practices that foster autonomy, relatedness, and psychological belonging.

By moving beyond rigid, nation-based, top-down approaches and investing in participatory, community-driven models within virtual spaces, MNEs and HRMs can orchestrate and foster organic, person-oriented interactions. Doing so can help restore harmony in globally dispersed workforces, strengthening cohesive organizational identity and a better sense of shared belonging in today's fragmented and often disjointed global environment.

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Table 1. Varying Degrees of Virtual Work

Key Aspects	Varying Degrees of Virtual Work		
	Domestic *(virtual collaboration mostly occurring within one country)*	**Hybrid** *(virtual collaboration occurring both within and across countries on a need-based basis)*	**Global** *(virtual collaboration with co-workers distributed/ dispersed globally)*
Dependency of technology	Low – technology serves as a supplementary means/modes of communication	Moderate – technology supports collaboration combining local and international participants	High- technology is the only means of communication and collaboration
Co-location possibility	High – team members often work physically in the same office, city, or country	Moderate – some team members co-located; others work remotely across regions or countries	Low – team members are dispersed globally with little to no possibility of physical co-location
Intercultural and International Complexity	Low – mostly within the same national culture and language	Moderate – mix of domestic and some international or intercultural interactions	High – diverse cultural backgrounds, languages, and international collaboration
Time zone differences	Low – team members usually share the same or very close time zones	Moderate – some time zone differences	Significant – spans multiple time zones, requiring asynchronous work and scheduling adjustments
Communication Complexity	Low – shared language and culture simplify communication	Moderate – some language and cultural differences, requiring adaptation and more careful communication	High – different level of linguistic proficiency, cultural norms, and communication styles increase complexity

Table 2. Data Collection Snapshot

Informants & Interviews	Demographics	Data Collection Period	Data Collected	Notes
• 47 informants • 52 interviews • Average duration: 85 minutes/ interview	• Age group: 24 – 55 • Working experiences: 2 – 35 • Gender: M & F & transgender • International backgrounds	Dec 2023 – Feb 2025	• Experiences when working virtually and in-office • Workplace dynamics • Sense of belonging at work	These represent just a subset of the data collected on the work and life experiences of globally mobile individuals

Table 3. Informant and Interview Details

No.	Informants	Interview period	Interview duration (hours)	Education	Gender	Age group	Leadership roles	Continent-of-origin	Current country of residence	Other countries (work, study, live)	Total years of work experience	Types of organization	Industry
1	Violet Carter	Feb.24 & Jan.25	1,25	MSc	F	20s		Europe	Finland	Estonia	1	Local	Healthcare
2	Amy	Feb.24	1,17	MSc	F	20s		Asia	Finland		2	Global	Automobile
3	Kathy	Feb.24	1	MSc	F	20s		Europe	Finland	Italy, US, Spain	2	Global	Sporting
4	Aurelie	Feb.24	1,5	MSc	F	20s		Europe	Finland	New Zealand, South Africa, US	3	Global	Consultancy
5	Grace	Apr.24	1,33	MSc	F	20s		Asia	Finland	US, Taiwan	5	Local	Education
6	Elen	Mar.24	2	MSc	F	20s		Asia	Finland		7	Local	Education
7	Anne	Feb.25	1,58	BSc	F	20s		North Africa	Finland		3,5	Global	Technology
8	Vio	Feb.24	1,68	MSc	F	30s		Asia	Finland	Czech, Russia	2	Global	Consultancy
9	Sydney	Feb.24	1,17	MSc	F	30s		Asia	Finland	South Korea	5	Global	Technology
10	Bianca	Feb.24	1,75	MSc	F	30s		Africa	Finland	Norway	6	Global	Consultancy
11	Jane	Feb.24	1	DSc	F	30s		Europe	Finland	Italy, US	7	Local	Art and Licensing
12	Roseline	Apr.24	1,42	MSc	F	30s		South America	Finland	US	9	Local	Finance/ F&B
13	Julia	Feb.24	1,58	BSc	F	30s		Europe	France	Germany	10	Global	Healthcare
14	Delia	Mar.24	1,25	BSc	F	30s		Europe	Poland		10	Global	Accounting
15	Mansikka	Feb.24	1,2	BSc	F	30s		Asia	Finland		14	Local	Hospitality
16	Tina	Mar.24	1,17	MSc	F	30s		Asia	UK	Malaysia	15	Global	Energy
17	Whizz	Feb.24	1,25	MSc	F	40s		Asia	Finland		6	Global	Automobile
18	Blessed	Mar.24	1,5	DSc	F	40s		Africa	Finland		7	Local	Education
19	Alex	Mar.24	1,83	MSc	F	40s		Europe	Germany	Netherland, Sweden, UK	12	Global	Electronics
20	Marta	Feb.24	1,58	MSc	F	40s		Europe	Germany	Finland	13	Global	Renewable Energy
21	Cindy	Mar.24	1,5	BSc	F	40s		Asia	Germany		15	Global	Energy
22	Beeta	Feb.24	1,33	MSc	F	40s		Asia	Finland		18	Local	Education
23	Mila	Apr.24	1,17	MSc	F	40s		Asia	Singapore	China, Norway, Netherlands	18	Global	Consultancy
24	Akaza	Feb.24	1,5	MSc	M	20s		Asia	Finland		4	Global	Fashion
25	Tom	Mar.24	1,17	MSc	M	30s		Europe	Germany	Czech	5	Global	Education
26	Dangond	Feb.24	1,5	BSc	M	30s		South America	Finland	Columbia	6	Global	Technology
27	Akira	Mar.24	1,33	MSc	M	40s		Asia	France	Brazil	9	Global	Fashion
28	Ahmed	Feb.24	1,5	DSc	M	40s		Asia	Finland	Sweden, UK	10	Local	Education
29	Jim	Mar.24	1,22	DSc	M	40s		Australia	Finland	Japan, UK, Australia	13	Local	Education
30	Luna	Mar.24	1,5	MSc	M	40s		South America	Germany	Brazil	15	Global	Construction
31	Matteo	Feb.24	2,42	MSc	M	40s	Yes	Europe	Poland	US, France, Germany, Russia	16	Global	Electronics
32	Peter	Mar.24	1,28	MSc	M	40s		North America	Malaysia	UK, Negeria, Mexico, US	17	Global	Supply Chain
33	Julio	Mar.24	1,67	MSc	M	40s		South America	Poland		17	Global	Accounting
34	Kazem	Feb.24	1,17	MSc	M	40s		Asia	Finland		18	Global	Automobile
35	Bruce	Apr.24	1,28	MSc	M	40s	Yes	Europe	Jersey	Malaysia, Oman, Qatar, Jersey	19	Global	Finance
36	Pablo	Mar.24	1	BSc	M	40s		Europe	Poland		20	Global	Healthcare
37	Sherlock	Mar.24	1,55	MSc	M	40s		Asia	Hong Kong/ China		25	Global	Finance
38	Lando C	Mar.24	1,5	MSc	M	40s	Yes	Australia	Hungary	Vietnam, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Phillipines	25	Global	Finance
39	Mark	Mar.24	1,17	MSc	M	40s	Yes	North America	US	Vietnam, Bangladesh, Jersey, France	25	Global	Technology
40	Dundee	Mar & Apr 24	2,00	MSc	M	40s		Australia	Hong Kong	Vietnam, UK	25	Global	Finance
41	Robert	May.24	1,00	MSc	M	40s	Yes	Australia	Hong Kong	China, Mexico, Paraguay, UK, Jersey	20	Global	Finance
42	Luis	Dec.23	1,0	PhD	M	50s		Europe	Sweden and Finland	France, Sweden	15	Local	Education
43	Jason	Feb.24	1,55	MSc	M	50s	Yes	Australia	Australia	US, Phillipines, Vietnam, India, China, Kor	21	Global	Healthcare
44	Louis	Mar.24	1,25	BSc	M	50s		Asia	Germany		31	Global	Electronics
45	Tiger	Mar.24	2,5	MSc	M	50s	Yes	Asia	Singapore	Dubai, China, India, Germany	35	Global	Technology
46	Charlie	Mar.24	1,08	MSc	T	30s		Asia	Finland		15	Global	Automobile
47	Aida	Feb.24	1,25	MSc	T	40s		Asia	Finland		12	Local	Construction

Figure 1. Data Structure

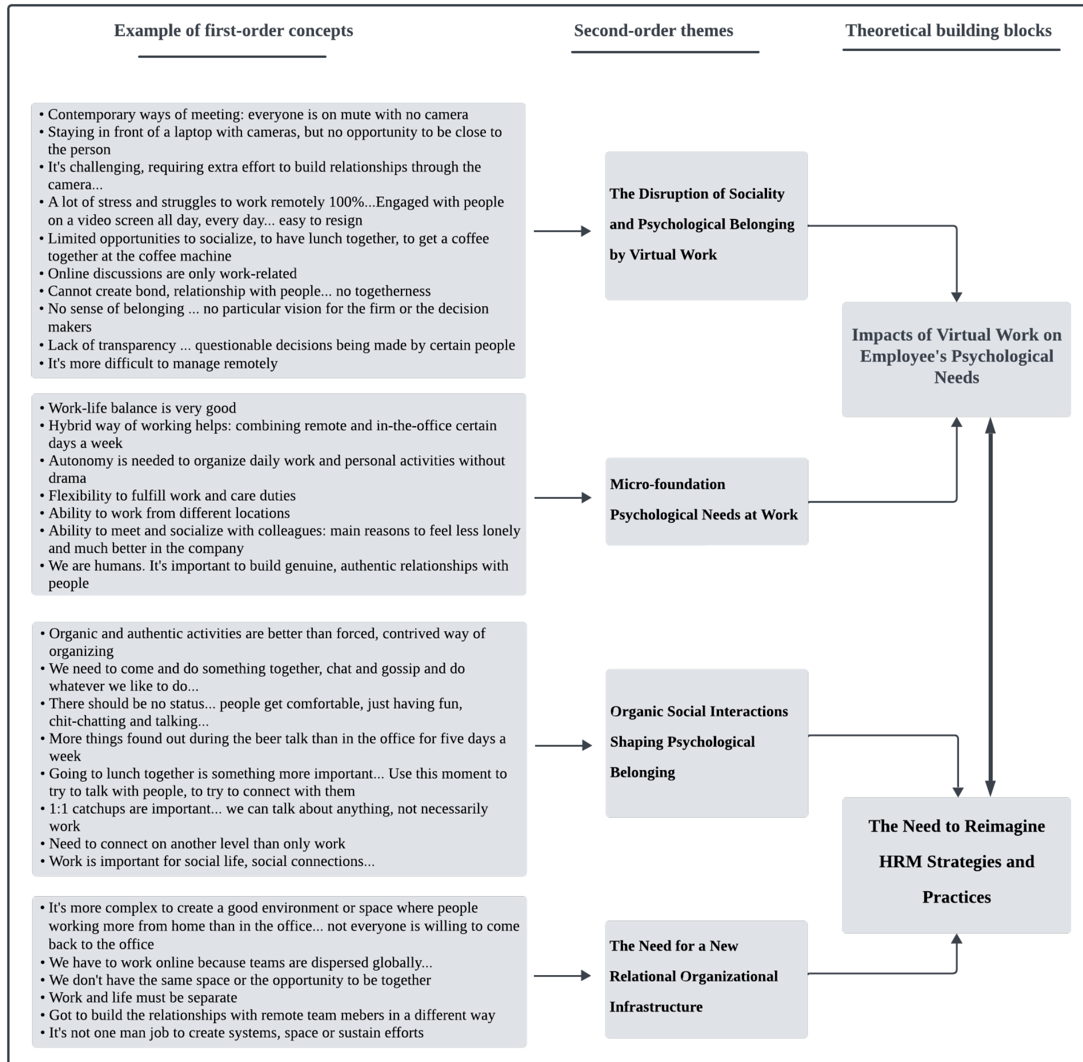
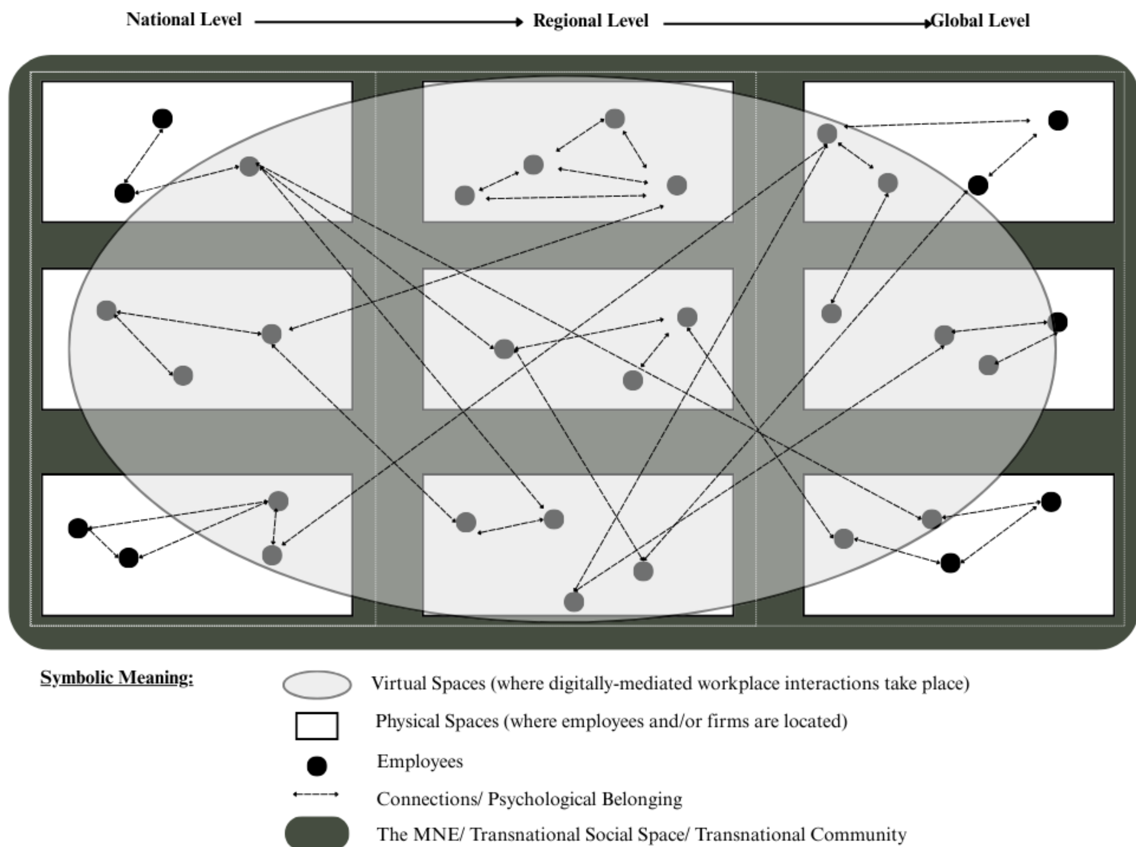


Figure 2. A Relational Infrastructure



[i] https://tenk.fi/en/research-integrity-ri

APPENDIX

Appendix 1

Examples of Interview Questions

1. Could you please introduce yourself and your work backgrounds?
2. What does a sense of belonging at work mean to you?
3. Scenario-based inquiries
    a. Can you tell actual or imagined events/ incidents where you feel a genuine sense of belonging at work?
    b. Can you tell actual or imagined events/ incidents where you experience a sense of non-belonging at work?
    c. Have you ever experienced a sense of 'belonging uncertainty' at work? Can you describe the situations and your feelings and/or experiences?

4. What are the strategies have you employed to cope and/or cultivate or nurture sense of belonging at work?
5. In which ways do you think your sense of belonging affects the quality of your work and the perception of your identity at work?
6. What are key factors that influence your sense of belonging generally and at work specifically – being a transnational employee?
7. What are your views and/or suggestions regarding nurturing a sense of belonging at work, particularly for transnational employees like you?