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Chib, Arul; Malik, Shelly; Aricat, Rajiv George; Siti Zubeidah Kadir

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Migrant Mothering and Mobile Phones:

Negotiations of Transnational Identity

Arul Chib, Shelly Malik, Rajiv George Aricat, and Siti Zubeidah Kadir

Nanyang Technological University

Authors' Note

Dr. Arul Chib is an Associate Professor at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Shelly Malik, Rajiv Aricat and Siti Zubeidah Kadir were graduate students in the same school at the time of writing. All correspondence related to the paper should be forwarded to [ArulChib@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:ArulChib@ntu.edu.sg)

### Migrant Mothering and Mobile Phones: Negotiations of Transnational Identity

For millions in developing countries, globalization means the availability of entrepreneurship opportunities in foreign lands. Driven by poverty and a lack of opportunities in their own countries, millions of migrants have crossed borders in search of a better life for themselves and their families, including approximately 1.5 million women who have left their homes to work, mainly as domestic helpers, in the industrialized economies of east and southeast Asia (Yeoh, Huang, & Devasahayam, 2004).

In Singapore, the site of our study, due to a high rate of female participation in the workforce and a reduction in the traditional sources of domestic help (Yeoh et al., 2004), about one in five households employs a foreign domestic worker (FDW), almost without exception female. The majority of these 209,600 FDWs in Singapore arrived from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka (Ministry of Manpower, 2013). FDWs perform various household duties, including childrearing and caring for the elderly.

These migrant workers' physical absence from their families creates a trade-off between material benefits and maternal supervision of their children. Ironically, as they are hired to undertake household responsibilities for their employers, these domestic helpers have to leave their own families, and therefore, their own household responsibilities, behind. This trade-off has ignited debates on the impact of such life choices on the children's welfare as well as on the emotional well-being of these transnational mothers, the term used to describe these migrant workers who attempt to perform their mothering duties from afar.

Traditional notions of motherhood have often revolved around specific themes of nurturing, protecting, caring, and socializing (Arendell, 2000), with emphasis on the personal

dynamic interaction that fosters and shapes a deeply meaningful connection between the mother and child (Oberman & Josselson, 1996). Transnational mothering challenges such mainstreams definitions of ‘intensive mothering’, replacing it with economic imperatives comprising the breadwinning role of a mother with nurturing from afar (Escobar, 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Parreñas, 2005a). Motherhood roles are not relinquished even though migrant mothers are geographically separated from their offspring, with constant communication with their children and respective caregivers regularly (Nicholson, 2006).

Nonetheless, transnational mothers who fail to conform to the dominant ideology of intensive mothering risk being subject to the ‘deviancy’ discourse of mothering. Despite evidence to the contrary (Battistella & Gastardo-Conaco, 1996), in the Philippines there is a general assumption that the extended period of separation from their mothers threatens the emotional and psychological well-being of the children, resulting in delinquency and a decline in moral values (Parreñas, 2005a). The label of the ‘broken home’ is applied to these transnational families split asunder by the twin factors of economic duress and opportunity (Escobar, 2010), seen as comprising a significant social cost attached to migration that implicates the global South (Madianou & Miller, 2011).

There is resistance to the all-encompassing universal notion of co-present mothering, with certain scholars considering such an approach based on particular historical, socio-cultural, and economic contexts (Arendell, 1999, 2000). McKay criticizes the assumption that “... ‘valid’ intimacy can only arise through face-to-face connections” and that it “extends a western, middle-class norm to non-western contexts, maintaining a western emotional hegemony” (McKay, 2007, p. 180). Concepts about mothering and children’s needs are constantly evolving, especially when women assume new social roles in the modern world. Different perspectives have developed as a

product of historical, cultural, and situational contexts which, therefore, mean that mothering practices can be “multiple and shifting” (Arendell, 2000, p. 1193). The alternative then is to map the rhizomatic space of migrants that extends across nations and gain an experiential understanding of the social meanings related to labor mobility and parent-child relationships (McKay, 2007).

The past decade has seen a surge in scholarship examining the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in transnational family networks (Aguila, 2009; Fortunati, Pertierra, & Vincent, 2012; Madianou, 2012; Madianou & Miller, 2011; Uy-Tioco, 2007; Vertovec, 2004; Wilding, 2006). With the call for more qualitative studies in different relationship contexts (Baym, Zhang, Kunkel, Ledbetter, & Lin, 2007; Fortunati, 2005; Licoppe, 2004; Miller, 2009; Yum & Hara, 2005), we focus here on migrant mothers, specifically foreign domestic workers, and explore how their cross-border child-rearing practices have benefited from the use of ICTs, with a particular focus on the mobile phone.

The rapid diffusion and ubiquity of mobile phones and their usage by international migrants has been recorded at length elsewhere. In brief, the convergence of mobile and online media, permitted by recent advancement in mobile technology and increasing affordability, means that those living in developing countries, such as the family members of these migrant workers, can now simultaneously leapfrog communication and digital divides in a single device (Ling & Donner, 2013; Pearce, 2013). To a certain extent, infrastructural barriers may pose a challenge, when areas where the migrants’ families live are not covered by mobile or landline phone services (Parreñas, 2005b). There is also the burden of having to cope with the costs of increased connectivity through ICTs (Lim & Thomas, 2010). For the migrant mothers, it is also a matter of distress to have fallen short of the expectations to physically care for their children, as

breadwinning alone does not encompass the totality of nurturing (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997).

Despite these obstacles, studies have shown how mobile communication technologies enable transformation of the way transnational mothers relate and care for their distant children. Parreñas (2005b) showed how female migrant workers from Philippines relied on the texting functionality of the mobile phone in order to make up for their separation from children and to monitor the children's upbringing. Incorporating mobile phones and the internet into everyday practices, transnational families construct a virtual connectedness, transcending temporal and spatial barriers, to compensate for the migrants' physical absence from their homes (Laurier, 2001; Licoppe, 2004; Wilding, 2006)

Transnational parents are now able to send money to their homes in developing countries with greater ease (Parreñas, 2005b). Aided by ICTs, transnational mothers have been able to alleviate some emotional strains, such as worry, fear, and sadness (Parreñas, 2001). Distant mothering has allowed women to take control of the parenting, as opposed to the co-present, but nominally responsible, father (Parreñas, 2005), leading to the 'masculinization of motherhood' (Uy-Toco, 2007, p. 260). Within the Singaporean context, the mobile phone has become an indispensable part of migrants' lives as they communicate with family and friends located both in host and home countries (Chib & Aricat, 2012; Thomas & Lim, 2011). Migrant mothers are able to care for their children from afar despite restrictions on their mobile phone usage (Lin & Sun, 2010).

However, Madianou and Millier (2011, p. 467) urge us to be "cautious with regard to the celebratory discourse" about the potential benefits of mobiles for migrants. We agree with these authors that, beyond the narrative of empowerment, there is a complexity to the use of mediated

communication that arises from ambivalence to their situation as migrants, and specifically as transnational mothers. Madianou (2012) has gone further to acknowledge the impact of ICT use on maternal identities, and described the process of negotiating the terrain of cultural contradictions they find themselves in.

Certainly, some have argued that the role and mobility of FDWs in today's globalized world are increasingly defined by restrictive "social and spatial practices," undergirded by power relations upon which the workers' employers have disproportionate control (Yeoh & Huang, 2010, p. 221). Even though mobile communication technologies provide more opportunities for transnational families to connect with each other, the technology is not able to fully overcome all limitations caused by geographic separation and distance, especially when there is a family crisis or conflict (Wilding, 2006).

We extend the notion of transnational mothers as agentic in terms of self-reflexivity and self-determination (Madianou, 2012; McKay 2007), focusing on their appropriation of mobiles as tools to resist the deviance discourse. To do so, we rely on the dialectic perspective (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Rawlins, 1983; Townsend, 1999) to frame FDWs' use of mobiles to negotiate contradictions encountered. Rather than taking a static viewpoint at the extremes of the situation as deviant or as a source of empowerment, we see a complex interplay of oppositions that requires constant negotiation, definition, renegotiation, and redefinition.

This dialectic stance thus allows us to identify everyday strategies employed by transnational mothers that aim to break free from the straitjackets of the ideological (the 'intensive mother', the 'empowered mother', the 'masculinized mother', etc.). The investigation uses these themes as a point of departure into the everyday practices that allow for negotiation of identity, as a mother, but also as a point of exploration into the multiple identities held by these

individuals beyond motherhood, that yet define the maternal experience. We contend that the creation of meaning requires examination of the individual holistically, including the various internal and external pressures that need negotiation in the determination of identity.

Our research question interrogates the role of mobile phones in dealing with the tensions and ambivalence of transnational mothering as a dialectical process. We emphasize understanding of dynamic strategies of identity-negotiation and meaning-creation, and the attendant risks that accompany them. In doing so, we let the struggles of our respondents guide us, resisting the urge to confine the analysis to that of mothering by examining identity and meaning from the holistic perspective of the individual, and the social structure surrounding them. We study how transnational mothers use both mobile phones and internet-related technologies such as Skype (VOIP application for telephony) and Facebook (social networking site), in an attempt to negotiate their transnational identities. The use of internet is also examined in the present study considering the high level of use of internet applications on mobile phone, in addition to computers.

### Methodology

This study utilized a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods—a short paper-and-pen survey, focus group discussions, and personal interviews with, and observations of, 22 female respondents (11 Indonesian and 11 Filipina). All the respondents utilized either mobile phones or the internet, or both, to communicate with family and friends. Respondents were recruited via snowball and convenience sampling at the Singaporean NGOs HOME and Transient Workers Count Too, or in downtown Singapore near regular congregation areas for FDWs on days off from work. A supplementary sample of 20 Filipinas was recruited to further investigate emergent themes regarding spouse and relative involvement in child-rearing.

The fieldwork was conducted in English for Filipino respondents and in Bahasa Indonesia for Indonesian respondents. Each respondent received S\$ 10 (US\$ 1 = approximately S\$ 1.25) as an incentive for participation. The average age of the sample was 36.8. Almost all respondents were married, but some were separated/divorced at the time of interview. The educational qualification of the respondents ranged from primary school to bachelor's degree. The respondents' length of stay in Singapore ranged from 2 to 13 years. The average monthly salary of the respondents was S\$ 522.2. All respondents had one to three children.

The survey elicited information on, besides demographics, mobile phone and internet experience in terms of frequency, duration, cost, and functionality. The interview guide consisted of questions related to the respondents' use of mobile phone and internet to communicate with their children, such as the types, frequency and duration of applications used, the topics discussed, and the barriers encountered. Their relationships with children, spouses and surrogate parents were investigated in relation to transnational mothering. Finally, observations on the basis of proximity and engagement of researchers with respondents on online social networks were included in the analysis. All names are withheld for reasons of confidentiality.

The audio recordings of the qualitative data were analyzed using thematic coding, in which the information obtained was interpreted and categorized according to the "themes in the context of a theory or conceptual framework" (Boyatzia, 1998, p. 11). Researchers listened to the recorded interviews and took note of the patterns of topics or issues that emerged with regard to respondents' use of mobile phones and transnational mothering.

## Findings

### *Mobile Phone and Internet Usage*

Most respondents used the mobile phone to make/receive phone calls and send/receive

text messages, while some used it to access the internet. The average monthly mobile phone bill was S\$ 50.4, which was mostly paid by the respondents themselves. The respondents had selectively adopted various functionalities of the internet; while some used chat more frequently, others networked through Facebook more often. Approximately half paid for the internet access themselves, while the other half accessed their employers' internet networks. Some respondents used mobile phones to go online, and if unfeasible utilized internet cafes and their employers' computer for access. A few respondents owned a smartphone, such as the Blackberry, iPhone4 or iPhone3. However, most were still using feature phones such as the Nokia 6300 and Nokia 5800 models.

#### *Using Mobile Phone and Internet for Transnational Mothering*

The most commonly used modes of communication for transnational mothering were text messages (SMS), mobile calls, and exchanges over social networking sites (SNS), specifically Facebook. A minority used public phones and home-phones daily to call their children. The frequency of their calls ranged from three times a day to once or twice a month, whereas the average duration of their call was less than 30 minutes per day. Night seemed to be the favourite time for calling children, although calls were reportedly made as and when the respondents felt the need. Text messaging emerged as one of the main modes of communication, with many respondents exchanging more than 10 messages daily with their children. Almost half of the respondents utilized online chat to communicate with their children. Although some used video-chat functions, its non-accessibility over mobile phones was a hindrance.

#### *The Reluctant Obsessive*

Transnational mothers exhibited the intensive mode of mothering, using the mobile phone as a key tool to resist the deviance narrative. These FDWs used a combination of text

messages, voice-calls, and social network platforms to maintain a continuous 'absent presence' (Uy-Tioco, 2007), otherwise described as 'endless remembering' (Escobar, 2010), and linked to the phenomenon of 'phatic communication' (Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005).

*The objective [of mobile phone conversation with my child] is to get along with the child, not only asking serious stuff, like, at this time whether you are doing school work, whether you help with the house chores, but also ask unimportant stuff and joke around in order to build a close relationship.*

While Madianou and Miller (2011) term this behavior as 'intensive mothering at a distance', we delve deeper into hesitations arising from the constant communication that these authors allude to. The intensive mode of mothering ran the risk of constant smothering, exhibited in commodification of the relationship into material benefits, surveillance of their children, and hierarchical communication styles. FDWs struggled to maintain the proper balance between an intensive nurturing style and the deviant mode of mothering that respected the growing independence of the children.

We find, in agreement with the extant literature, a high degree of mediated communication between the respondents and their children, particularly text messaging (Lin & Sun, 2010). Most respondents, irrespective of their nationality, were constantly worried about their children. The reasons for motherly worries were varied; mothers of younger children worried about their health and studies, whereas those with pre-teen or teenage children worried their children being lured into bad company, drugs, alcohol, and smoking.

Mobile phone communication enabled the respondents to allay fears about their children to a great extent, as they were able to contact them and monitor their activities and whereabouts closely. Some participants often called at night to ensure that their children were at home instead of out with friends.

*Because talk to them makes us... our children, when they hear my voice they*

*will think that I am there... I can feel that they are just by my side but I am not with them. We cannot live without the hand-phone.*

Unless their children were too young, the respondents added them as friends on Facebook, which allowed monitoring of the children's Facebook wall, status, and photo albums, as well as the profiles of their children's friends. A mere scanning of photo albums and profiles of their children was reassurance for some, whereas others actively interacted by posting comments that blandished, disciplined or even simply joked with their children. Some respondents continued to monitor their children's pre-existing illnesses via mobile phone.

*I always ask about the weather because the third one has asthma. My youngest [son] will always SMS me to tell me about the brother's [condition].*

Despite the distance, they continued to encourage their children either through text messages or mobile calls to study hard and listen to their teachers. Respondents with higher educational qualifications provided real-time input into their children's studies, often by helping their children do homework via online chat. Certain modalities, such as video chat, were preferred for the emotional clarity offered.

*Actually [I prefer] video cam[era] 'cause it is clearer, I can talk and see at the same time and can see their [children's] facial expressions. But because I can't use it as and when I need, so I have to use the hand-phone.'*

Although they lived apart, most respondents set certain rules for their children, either directly or in discussion with the caregivers. The commonly mentioned rules were related to discipline and time management, such as the time their children had to be home, involvement in household chores, and dating guidelines. We note that these rules extended to the use of mobile phone and internet, and overlapped with other domains in which rules were to be obeyed, particularly in the romantic realm.

*I have to know everything about my son, from bathing to going to the toilet. He is also open to me; for instance, he told me that there was a girl chasing him.*

*He also asked for my permission to join karate. His karate teacher told him not to play with girls if he wanted to join karate. So he then told me that he didn't want to have a relationship with girls now.*

*The negative side is that she often SMS and forgets her studies. Even if her mobile phone is taken away, it is not a good solution as it makes her upset. So I would tell her gently to finish her homework first before playing with her mobile phone.*

Some respondents gave general instructions to their children to switch off the phone at night and not to use it during exam periods, whereas several others were very specific in their instructions, assigning a definite time and number of hours their children were allowed to use the mobile phone or internet. The practice of intensive mothering required that mother-to-child communication channels were always left open, no matter whether other restrictions applied.

*It's good because I can monitor their everyday life, even though I am so far away, the bond is still there, my moral support is always there. If possible I don't want to cut my communication with them, so every day I ask them where they are.*

Respondents were aware that, in creating an intensive identity of mothering, there existed the risk of commodification of the relationship (Parreñas, 2005b). While the respondents used text messages to check on their children's studies, the children used it to express their affection, such as "Mama, I love you, I miss you", simultaneously using the opportunity to request money. Thus, soothing words from mothers were often accompanied by some tangible allowances to overcome their sadness; the children were allowed to buy desirable toys, were allowed to go to the arcade or consume fast food. Mobile phones, however, offered a tool to regulate the relationship at a level of equitable reciprocity. Respondents replaced material benefits, as a means to assuage their guilt, with emotional support, preferring to call their children to offer encouragement and support. The modality of communication seemed important, with voice-calls preferred to text messages when dealing with negative emotions.

*I always ask them why you feel sad, then they always tell me why. Better to call than SMS, because in SMS you cannot tell what they are feeling inside. I always tell them, good or bad, tell me so I can help you. So I always spend a lot on global calls on this, because I don't want my children to keep anything inside their heart.*

The need to engage in an intensive mode of mothering combined with the transnational circumstances of spatial and temporal distance led to hierarchical mothering relationships. Upon noticing an occasional breach of rules, most respondents reasoned with the children, but some resorted to punitive action, from mild (reduction in pocket money to the unremorseful child) to harsh (asking the child to kneel down and face the wall for an hour), sometimes extending into restrictions on mobile phone usage.

[When asked if respondent had directed caregiver to take away her child's mobile phone as a punishment] *Yes, I have. At that time, I banned him from using the mobile phone for a week as he didn't go for the Friday prayer.*

Respondents with older children provided advice to the latter when they made important life decisions. Overall, the respondents fully controlled the decision-making process in the case of younger children and partially in the case of older ones.

*I usually give them whatever they want but there is a limit, for example if I know it is right, then I let him do... otherwise, I tell him not to do it. He can make his own decisions but some of them I disagree, like if he always wants to be free, always go out with his friends, if I think his friends are not good. In school I let him choose what he wants. If I choose and he doesn't want, there's nothing I can do.*

Some respondents, in unconscious recognition of the intrusiveness of the intensive approach of mothering conducted virtually, chose to keep track of their children's personal lives from a distance, by 'following' their children on Facebook.

*I check who her friends are, her activities. I see when she posts comments and if it's not very nice, I will comment on her to watch her words but I don't comment on her friends because I don't want to interfere with her life.*

*I read the status on her Wall. There are jokes, angry status. If we do not*

*become their friends, we can't see them. So far, [the contents] are still ok. But we still need to monitor.*

*Nowadays, children like to compete to collect as many friends as they could, add a lot of them till 500 although they don't know each of them. I don't want her to mix with a lot of older people, so I would ask her about them. She would tell me that they are just ordinary friends and are never in contact.*

We note that, despite the freedom afforded older children, there was evidence of an unspoken-yet-established hierarchy. Mothers could comment on and regulate online behavior of their children, yet the reverse rarely occurred; most claimed that the children seldom posted any comments on their wall.

*...she like this Korean artist so she put there, "I am addict[ed] to you," so I comment, "Hey, why are you addict[ed] to him?" Then she say, "It's OK Mummy, I only like him."*

The process of mobile communication, however, acted as a barrier for mothers allowing children greater autonomy with age. The economic earning power resided almost entirely with the migrant mothers. The cost of the communication was borne by the FDWs, paying for both their own and the children's expenses, thus playing an important role in the determination of the initiation, modality, timing, length, and frequency of the communication in the relationship. Even in the event of matters of import, children needed to initiate sharing of personal matters through text messages first, which the respondents then followed up with phone calls, thus reinforcing the hierarchy in the relationship.

*Every month I give my daughter 500 thousand rupiah for school fee, pocket money, including to pay for the mobile phone credit. I top up the mobile phone credit from here [Singapore].*

Children, however, used mobile communication, or its absence, to challenge the hierarchy, and reveal emotions. Text messaging was often the first mode of communication for FDWs to learn about their children's unhappiness; the absence of communication was a tell-tale

sign that the children were upset. We find here the presence of mobile communication, in this case the absence, as a tool to regulate emotion and negotiate the maternal relationship at a distance.

*Sometimes I know when they feel sad because they don't want to talk to me, so I have to wait for them to call, so I SMS them to ask them if they are feeling better. But I think they follow me because when I'm upset I also don't talk.*

### *The Diverted Professional*

Employers of FDWs created various rules to constrain their employees' communication with their own children, which required a variety of strategies to encounter, including the use of devices outside of the long workday, hiding the phone, etc. (Mei Hua & Chib, 2012).

*I am allowed to use it [mobile phone] only at nighttime. She [employer] said that even using mobile phone requires electricity.*

For respondents who accessed the internet via computers, not having their own personal computer was an infrastructural barrier that put them at the mercy of the employer. In such cases, the respondents had to wait for their employer's computer to be free or wait in the long queues at internet cafes. Likewise, in situations when mobile credits ran out, children were still able to contact them on another number provided by their employers, re-emphasizing the inordinate control that employers had on communication related to their transnational mothering.

Despite these employer-created restrictions, the care-chain networks identified by Parreñas (2001) has led to FDWs caring for employer's children at the expense of caring for their own children, and has been variously described as 'diverted', 'displaced', and 'substitute' mothering (Lan, 2003; Lindio-McGovern, 2003; Parreñas, 2001; Wong, 1994;). We find similar instances, with one FDW expressing regret at having to take care of the employer's children, while she herself was not able to care for her own. Lan (2003) suggests that the practices of diverted mothering are a source of "emotional rewards and social recognition" (p. 197), with the

accompanied risk of being manipulated by employers to extract surplus unpaid labor, a risk only compounded with the constant connectivity provided by mobiles.

It is evident that diverted mothering creates a whole range of risks and restrictions for the transnational mother, particularly in maintaining communication links, and a healthy relationship, with her own child. At first glance, the behaviors associated with diverted mothering seem contradictory with that of intensive mothering. It is argued that the professional role created by these FDWs may bring about feelings of liberation and personal development (Arendell, 1999, 2000). The fact of economic independence creates a strong identity of being the breadwinner, in contrast to the traditional diminished role of women as providers (Uy-Tioco, 2007). Madianou (2012) suggests a “desire for recognition and self-improvement” (p. 286) as a motivation, identifying a “tension between their roles as mothers and their identities as women” (p. 287). The rationalization that occurs involves co-modifying the relationship from being solely a nurturer, providing physical and emotional comfort, to that of providing material security (Parreñas, 2001), which needs to be explained to the children, who sometimes feel abandoned and neglected.

*Usually they get upset at school, sometimes it's because they see other kids, their mother brings them to school, so I tell them they will get used to it, because if I'm there I cannot give them an education.*

We argue here that the struggle for identity occurs at a variety of levels. The first struggle occurs between the professional identity and the role of the intensive mother. FDWs perform their role of the surrogate with enthusiasm, and pride of profession, to the extent of leaving themselves open to subtle exploitation. Certainly, gaining respect within the home community as a breadwinner is important (Madianou, 2012), as is the ability to improve the welfare of their children economically (Parreñas, 2001), but so is the respect earned as a

responsible employee.

A second struggle occurs between the perceived empowerment of employment versus the actual menial nature of the job itself, light-heartedly articulated as, “*Here we are the maid, but there we are the boss!*” As observed elsewhere, respondents were often well-educated in their home countries, yet found themselves earning a living as maids (Lin & Sun, 2010), a situation requiring both personal resolution and articulation to their children, a task some found insurmountable. The internal struggle faced by these FDWs resulted in the interpersonal strategy of concealing emotional expression, as reported elsewhere (Madianou, 2012; Mei Hua & Chib, 2012).

*My daughter has ever asked me, “Actually what is my Mama doing there [in Singapore]?” She is curious and also she does not want her mother to do something that in public’s opinion is not good. But until now, not that I want to hide the truth, but I do not want my daughter to feel sad. So until now, about my status as a maid, my daughter is not aware.*

#### *The Remote-control Parent*

One characteristic of transnational mothering has been the reliance on alternative care networks comprising relatives in the host country, termed ‘shared mothering’ (Schmalzbauer 2008). Often these caregivers comprised immediate relatives such as grandparents and aunts of the children. We found that complementing their direct interaction with children, the respondents also talked at length with the children’s caregivers and teachers so as to reassure themselves about the safety, well-being, health and academic performance of their children. Caregivers thus became a conduit of information relayed over the mobile phone, also sometimes uploading photos of children who did not have a presence on any SNS. The role of the caregiver as a proxy presence for the absent transnational mother required a fine degree of transnational coordination.

*When my daughter was still in high school, I made the decision. I told my parents that I am still the one managing the money, not my parents. But the*

*ATM card was held by my parents. I would communicate my thoughts to my parents, and my parents would tell my daughter. As I still have parents, I need to respect them, so that my daughter also would still respect them. So whatever that I tell my parents, my parents would tell my daughter exactly the same, not more or less.*

Respondents set rules and regulations for their children, often in discussion with the caregivers, who were responsible for their regulation. The transnational mothers needed to balance establishment of their own prominence as the primary parent with allowing caregivers autonomy over the child in the immediate and co-present situation.

*I told my daughter that if she does not want her mobile phone taken away [by her grandmother or uncle], then she should be obedient and able to steal the heart of her grandmother and uncle. Because my brother-in-law is fierce, so my daughter is afraid of him. You have to be clever in pleasing them if you still want to use your mobile phone, I told her. I also do not want your mobile phone to be taken away from you. But what to do, I am not the one who is with you.*

The practice of shared mothering by remote-control came into direct conflict with the notion of intensive mothering, wherein the FDWs wished to establish their position as the mother, yet struggled with the fact that their interaction required an intermediary. Dealing with these contradictions required strategies involving the suppressing of information, particularly personal revelations, as well as sources of information, to maintain the special nature of the mother-child relationship.

*[I usually] chat via video. I talk about their daily activities. Usually the whole [extended] family will go together to the internet café to chat together. So I cannot talk about personal stuff with them. [I will talk about] personal stuff via phone call [later].*

*Sometimes my mother tells me that my daughter is lazy, doesn't want to help her to wash clothes or help her to make food for sale. So after my mom told me, I would reprimand my daughter, but without her knowing that I knew it from my mom, as she would then think that my mom told her off.*

The contradictions of shared mothering were felt most acutely in times of crisis, when mobile phones, rather than improving the situation, exacerbated the woes of geographic separation. For example, when FDWs children fell sick, the co-present role of the caregivers impinged on their protective identity of the intensive mother.

*I always talk to them [children], monitor them, tell them what medicine to take. As a woman, I feel sad and cry because this is the time they need us, but what to do, I can only call them and comfort them. [I] tell them if you cannot take it, go to your grandma and ask for help.*

The feeling of helplessness was exacerbated by the fact that sometimes the sick children did not wish to talk to their distant mothers. Whether the children's behavior was a result of physical debilitation caused by illness, or as an emotional response charging their mothers to assume guilt for their absence, is a topic for further investigation. The respondents noted that the mobile phone at least enabled them to be informed of their children's condition through text messages or phone calls, thus accentuating the challenges to intensive mothering.

*But if she's sick, she's usually not in the mood to reply SMS or call. So I will call my mother-in-law to check if she has taken her medicine. I will also ask my mother-in-law to pass the phone to her. She would listen but she would not reply much.*

Another source of external struggle arose from being perceived as a "walking ATM" by the caregivers. As mentioned previously, there was a certain empowerment from assuming the role of the provider, with FDWs taking on, almost entirely, the financial responsibilities for raising their children.

*Ya money number one... I have to pay my niece also because she [is] helping me to look after my kids.*

However, this identity was problematic as the perception of financial independence was open to abuse from demanding caregivers, translated by Lan (2003) from the original Tagalog as the "debts of gratitude" (p. 194). This relationship needed to be handled with care, as the role of

the caregiver in the upbringing of the child was an important one. The trust developed in the surrogate parenting relationship extended into the financial relationship, a potential source of friction, which were addressed via regular mobile phone conversations.

*Every week I call... I always ask them [caregivers] about what they want and then about my husband. Because sometimes always asking about money. And if they have a problem, they call me sometimes like that.*

Transnational mothers were caught in a struggle between wanting to play the nurturing, caring role of the mother, yet having to do this via proxy caregivers. The trust required both to hand over their child-rearing responsibilities and to deal with the financial complexities that arose from it, was partially repaid by the benefits of the arrangement. Nonetheless, a variety of communication strategies, such as parenting via mobile and withholding expression, were employed in managing the triangular relationship.

### *The Incomplete Union*

Transnational mothers within the working classes have long borne both the responsibility and the burden of being the primary parent concerned with the upbringing of their children (Aguila, 2009; Parreñas, 2005b). The relationship of the transnational mother with the child has often been described as a singular, distinct entity, disregarding the role of the father.

*I cannot depend on my husband only, so I have to do my part. If your father cannot do it, I have to do it.*

Transnational migration brings with it stresses related not only to mothering, but also pressures the marital union, which may have existing problems. Madianou (2012) describes abusive, unsatisfactory relationships in the home country from which escape was necessary; yet on the other hand, there are reports of mobile phones being used by FDWs for the purpose of creating long-distance intimacies (Thompson, 2009). We found that mobile phones played a significant role in strengthening parental unions that focused on child-rearing, with respondents

able to “...tell everything. Share everything. About my children’s graduation, high school graduation and my elementary graduation.” On the other hand mobile communication highlighted stark differences between the parents, with one respondent saying “since I came here I don’t scold them, for me I don’t know how to shout over the phone... it’s like I’m shouting at myself. So, I talk to them nicely and softly. So they always say to their father “how come you shout, shout, shout; mum don’t shout?””.

We also found that stressed marital unions played a significant role in the process of transnational mothering. The unreliability of the father was a recurrent theme, alluding often to the victimization of the female, but often relayed as part of a gender-empowered narrative of the FDWs (Lan, 2003).

*I send all the money back to my own account. I know that there is something amiss. For example I will send the money, I will buy top up for him [husband], I send the money through Western Union, after I send him the control number, the mobile phone is off, all night. After he received the money, the mobile phone you cannot contact anymore.*

*I just close my eyes because I want our relationship for our children but he is not interested. He work abroad and then he is there and problem start. He didn’t give us the support. Then how? I come here, I tried to understand him but he still refuse to co-operate so I just let him go. Anyway, I can grow up my children without him. He didn’t give us any support so I don’t need him lah.*

The disruptive patterns within the marital union soon appear in the maternal relationship, with one FDW claiming that “My child sent me an SMS, saying that he is a victim of his parents’ divorce”. Respondents used mobile phones as a strategy to deal with the rifts within the family, with one stating that “Sometimes I SMS to my kid to talk to their father.” Conversely, mobile phones had the potential for disruption, with the back-firing of children’s strategies aiming to safeguard the marital union, with one respondent receiving a message from

*...my own son. Cry but of course I take action. I call to my mother and want to talk to my husband. I confront him. She don’t want to tell me the truth; he tell*

*me the truth. Aiyer [Exclamation], he sleep with the woman. That time I cannot accept, I want to jump out of the window because that time I just go back.*

The stresses of being the sole parent responsible were further compounded by having to maintain the identity of the virtuous woman, as reported by other researchers (Lan, 2003), particularly for the benefit of the children. Respondents felt it unnatural to show intense emotions, like expressions of anger, over the mobile phone, instead aiming for sharing of lighter moments with their children. The motif often revolved around romantic relationships. While the children blandished their (separated) mothers about remarrying or having a boyfriend, the respondents would tease their children about having a girlfriend or boyfriend, getting married, and about their prospects of becoming grandmothers.

*Oh yes, I always ask them if they have a girlfriend, they always say they are still studying, usually over the phone. They also joke with me. They ask me, "mama you got boyfriend or not, because a lot of my friends, my neighbours, they all have boyfriends."*

The demise of existing marital unions combined with the stifling loneliness of the migrant condition led to some respondents being interested in developing local intimacies, with a respondent stating that "*Being away from the family, sometimes feel homesickness. Feeling lonely, sometimes of course nobody's perfect*". The mobile phone, with the added feature of mediation as a safety-catch, provided an outlet to satisfy emotional, romantic and sexual desires (Wolffers, Fernandez, Verghis, & Vink, 2002). While in some instances the communication remained on a platonic level, "*But I have text mate [Singaporean, Male]. Give advice, sharing of each other advice*", at other times, one respondent revealed that "*No, my husband never cheat. I cheat. I don't know. Husband very good. Me - I cheater. Maybe. [Husband] Suspect[s] maybe.*" We note that the need of FDWs for emotional support (Chib, Wilkin, Mei Hua, forthcoming) led to some seeking validation of their identities as women, yet this search for meaning, coming into

conflict with that of the transnational mother, had to be subsumed in a private identity.

The strong emphasis on the virtuosity of the intensive mother revealed itself in a switch of the traditional protective role. Some children, usually older, took it upon themselves to ensure a stifling of romantic interest on behalf of their mothers, sometimes without their knowledge as counter-surveillance on SNS by children. As part of the fieldwork to understand usage, researchers befriended a few respondents on Facebook, only to receive a friend request from a daughter of a respondent. When asked why she wanted to make friends, the following exchange between the girl and a male researcher occurred:

Daughter: *ok.. by the way, how are you related to my mom?? i'm just curious...*

Respondent: *We have some common friends; don't know each other that well.*

Daughter: *i don't care 'bout u!... pls stop stoking [stalking] my mom... pls...*

#### Discussion

This research aimed to interrogate the dialectic tensions arising from transnational motherhood, investigating the role of mobile phones as a means of negotiating identity and creating meaning. An investigation into the lived experiences of transnational motherhood, examined through the lens of mobile phone communication, reveals that the identities and roles of FDWs are not only multiple and shifting (Arendell, 2000), but that they are often overlapping and conflicting. The transnational mother is simultaneously a domestic worker, a relative, a spouse and a woman, amongst the key identities studied here, and assigned distinct labels of the reluctant obsessive, the diverted professional, the remote-control parent, and the incomplete union. We make two observations regarding the impact of these multiplicities of identities found within the individual on the creation of dialectic tension, before proceeding to discuss the role of mobile phones in their negotiation and resolution.

Firstly, while prior research into transnational motherhood has necessarily positioned

this particular identity at the center of the individual's meaning making, we suggest that the previously described often-oppositional identities create conflict, and require active engagement and resolution. This is not to suggest that this process necessarily achieves resolution, but that it certainly creates frustrations that need to be addressed. Secondly, the assigned labels are meant to betray tensions even amongst each distinct identity. In resisting the deviance discourse, the mode of intensive mothering requires a struggle against oppressive control of the child, evidenced in hierarchical communication and surveillance. Professional empowerment and economic independence for the FDW arrives at the expense of the neglect of her own child, with the mobile phone tying her to foreign employers. Intensive mothering at a distance requires the mediation of a proxy caregiver, with whom a delicate trust-transfer symbiosis must be negotiated via transnational communication. The assumption of responsibilities of primary parenting subsumes the woman as an emotional, romantic and sexual being, with the communication related to this identity having to be kept hidden, and the tension resulting in possible counter-surveillance online.

We note that these struggles and negotiations occur within existing social hierarchies and norms. One key tension for transnational mothers is in avoiding the deviance discourse created within the family-oriented culture to which these women belong. FDWs utilize mobile phones actively as a tool to negotiate and redefine the relationships that create fissures in their sense of self, including for the management of third-party relationships, withholding of emotions or information, and engaging in counter-intuitive phenomenon such as restricting, or actively dis-engaging from, mobile phone usage as communication strategy.

One theoretical construct that can shed light on the management of multiple identities is that of social identity, or how individuals perceive membership to various social groups, thus

guiding their social behaviors (Brewer, 1991; Tajfel, 1974), as well as being a way of dealing with stress (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). There has been some application of social identity in the process of migrant acculturation and motivations (Van Laar, Derks, Ellemers, & Bleeker, 2010; Padilla & Perez, 2003). In terms of transnational mothering, Escobar (2010) uses the theory as a way to legitimize the role of migrants as mothers, yet limits the discussion to the management of this sole identity. We, in extension, encourage deeper research in the multiple, and interacting, social identities assumed and managed by transnational mothers, as outlined in the distinct identities found here, as part and parcel of the condition.

In this respect, we propose that mediated communication via mobile phones, while frequent, and often conducted as phatic communication (Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005), is not necessarily strategized for maintaining a continuous absent presence or for endless remembering (Escobar, 2010; Uy-Tioco, 2007). We contend that mobile phones are used, and sometimes not used, as purposeful communicative strategies to manage personal and public identities, and redefine dynamic relationships, sometimes nudging them in a desired direction, while at others confronting problems head-on.

Thus the women, in attempting to create meaning in their lives, constantly negotiate the shifting terrain of identities and relationships in quite a dynamic manner. Examined from this perspective, female empowerment via mobile phones then acquires meaning as a process rather than as an objective. The tensions of the dialectic ensure that women, through continuous re-invention and re-negotiation, arrive at a position entirely novel to the one from which they begin the journey (Townsend, 1999). We agree with Madianou's (2012) observation that ICTs play a key role in the negotiation of the 'accentuated ambivalence' (p. 292), but simultaneously point to the role of ICTs in creating an emergent gender-consciousness (Chib & Chen, 2011; Foss &

Foss, 2009), with the evolution of the multi-faceted personality that encompasses various aspects of empowerment of the woman.

Despite having a cross-cultural sample, our focus remained entirely on the role of mobile communications, plausibly missing unique and relevant observations; thus we call for further investigation into the role of culture in transnational motherhood. We further support the trend of transnational methods to study transnational phenomenon, with the respondent pool being sourced from both host and home countries, since observations from other influential actors can enrich our understanding. In conclusion, this study suggests that the investigations into the complexities of transnational mobile phone communication will lead to greater understanding of on-going processes of social change involving migration and gender.

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