

LIVING LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and their loved ones in the Philippines manage to have dynamic relationships despite physical distance with Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) or the use of new media (the Internet and cellular phone). Theoretically guided by Marshall McLuhan and Stuart Hall, this paper presents three case studies that depict how individuals mindfully use communication technology to enact their relationships. Such interactions also entail the exchange of new ideas on gender roles, family relations, and dominant-subordinate roles that lead to cultural change. Conclusively, technology has made it easier for OFWs and their loved ones to overcome their aversion to being in long-distance relationships and overseas employment.

Keywords: *New media, Long-distance relationships, Diaspora, Relationship maintenance, Computer-mediated communication*

Introduction

Migration is an inescapable reality in the Philippines where more than a million citizens leave each year for permanent or temporary residence abroad (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, 2008). Amid growing concerns about the social costs of this diaspora, the Philippine government promotes overseas employment as one of the primary means of keeping the national economy afloat. So inescapable is Filipino migration that almost every Filipino in the Philippines has a loved one living abroad. A national survey conducted by the independent research group Social Weather Stations revealed that 52 percent of Filipino families have relatives located in various countries (Mangahas, 2004).

The impact of this burgeoning migration on Philippine society can only be described as profound. The country's history has reached a point where practically every Filipino has a friend, family member or relative working abroad. These close ties are maintained over great distances through, among other tools,

the Internet and the cellular phone. In other words, Filipinos anywhere in the world keep in touch through Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). Migration has become, for many Filipinos, both an economic as well as a social phenomenon. The Philippine government credits Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) as modern-day heroes who keep the country's economy afloat with their dollar remittances. In no other place in the world has migration to other countries been so proudly encouraged. A majority of the population has at least a family member, relative, or friend working abroad. This migration has become so dramatic that it is now rightly called the 'Filipino Diaspora'.

Just as dramatically, migration comes at a high price. Filipino society has become a fragmented one whose members are separated not only by geography but also by ideology and culture. Deprived of physical intimacy, loved ones cope with separation using all means possible to maintain their close relationships. This study explores communication technology's effects on the relationships of OFWs and their loved ones in the Philippines. Importance is given to the pervasive use of the Internet and the mobile phone—the newest and most accessible communication media of our time.

Indeed, CMC has become so ingrained in the Filipino's daily life (Buena, 1999; Cabrera & Orbe, 1997; Coloma & Villa, 1999; Oñate & Sison, 2000; Pertierra, 2007a; Pertierra, 2007b; Pertierra, 2008; Portus, 2005). Long Distance Relationships (LDRs) simultaneously benefit and suffer from the use of such tools (Aguila, 2006; Miller, 2009; Pertierra, 2006; Solis, 2007). Undoubtedly, the most ideal form of communication is still Face-to-Face (FIF) interaction (Fortunati, 2005). However, the reality is that OFWs and their loved ones have no choice but to depend on CMC alone. Along with this assumption comes a concern for the quality of such relationships. The continuous and fast-paced evolution of CMC has contributed complex issues to the redefinition of self, human relationships, and community. These changes are apparent in modern Filipino relationships which are unavoidably affected by the use of communication technology. The impact of such is even more pronounced among OFWs and their loved ones.

While a great deal of research has focused on OFWs and the use of new media, this article presents three case studies involving communication in diverse types of OFWs and their left-behind loved ones. This answers the strong recommendations of past researchers (Baym, Zhang, Kunkel, Ledbetter & Lin, 2007; Fortunati, 2005; Miller, 2009; Ramirez & Broneck, 2009; Yum & Hara, 2005) on the need to do more qualitative studies that view media effects without ignoring the nuances and contexts of particular relationships. Thus,

cases were deliberately limited in number but aimed for maximum variety.

In a speech before the Filipino community in Agana, Guam in May of 2005, Commission on Filipinos Overseas Chair Dante A. Ang acknowledged that the Philippines supplies one-fourth of the world's shipping labor (220,000 seafarers and marine officers) and 25 percent of all overseas nurses in the world (Ang, 2005). Next to India, the country is also the world's second-largest exporter of doctors. Close to half of Filipinos now living and working abroad are Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). According to the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA), more than 1.2 million OFWs were deployed from January to December of 2008 (Philippine Overseas Employment Agency, 2008). This showed an increase of nearly 15 percent from the OFW deployment from the year before. Official numbers are, naturally, very conservative, not considering OFWs who have found overseas jobs through illegal channels.

Even so, it is safe to assume that OFWs have more than one left-behind loved one in the Philippines. These may include immediate family members, relatives, romantic partners, and friends who they communicate with primarily through new media. Of course, overseas employment is not unique to Philippine nationals but is common among citizens of other Third World countries who are forced to migrate to more developed nations amid the material scarcity of their home country. Add to that a strong sense of kinship and filial ties among Filipinos who have no choice but to live apart. Such conditions have led to an upsurge in communication creativity through the Internet and cellular phone.

In its 2007 report, the National Telecommunication Commission (NTC) said there were 57 million (65-percent density) mobile phone subscribers and 2.5 million Internet users. Again, such are very conservative numbers considering alternative accessibility through pre-paid cellular phone options and Internet cafes. Even the Philippine government has acknowledged the country's reputation as "the texting capital of the world" with its average of 2 billion text messages sent daily (Office of the Press Secretary, 2009).

There has been extensive research on Filipino migration and the maintenance of long-distance relationships. Lines have been drawn between those who believe in the benefits of communication technology (Ballecer, Chacko, Alejo, Paloma & Valera, 2008; Paragas, 2006; Pertierra, 2007; Signo, 2007; Solis, 2007) and those who do not (Angeles & Sunanta, 2007; Christensen, 2009; Portus, 2005). While the numbers are increasing for the latter camp, some (Fuchs, 2009; Hlebec, Manfreda & Vehovar; 2006; Kipomaa, 2007; Lopez,

Mangunay & Sulit, 2008; Uotinen, 2003) prefer to stay on neutral ground. In the developing discussion, this paper seeks to understand the distinct experiences of those whose relationships can only—for the meantime, at least—be enacted mainly through mediated-communication. Such is an attempt to avoid generalizations and seek deeper understanding of the Filipino diaspora.

Two communication theories guided this research: Stuart Hall's Critical Cultural Theory and Marshall McLuhan's Theory of Technological Determinism. Critical Cultural Theory views communication as meaning making vis-à-vis power issues that are inherent in human relationships. Hall mainly saw mass media as tools by which dominant and inferior cultures negotiate status through the acceptance, rejection, or alteration of a common culture (Griffin, 2000). Thus, it was assumed that power issues (social, economic, and political status) are important facets of long-distance relationships since these are negotiated through communication tools. McLuhan's insight that culture change is a direct result of technology was applied to the use of new media in long-distance relationships of OFWs and their left-behind loved ones. Technological Determinism predicted that the Computer Age will give birth to the Global Village which renders the limits of time and space obsolete (Griffin, 2000). To people forced to carry on long-distance relationships, there can be no greater benefit than that.

Objectives and Methodology

The three cases presented in this article were investigated with the following objectives: to explore the CMC preferences and habits of key informants in their long-distance relationships; to discover informants' perceptions on the advantages, disadvantages, and importance of using CMC in their long-distance relationships; and, to describe how CMC has affected OFWs and their loved ones' perceptions about the long-distance relationships and migration. The cases are analyzed in search of answers to the following questions: How do new media (the Internet and mobile phone) re-shape the long-distance relationships of OFWs and their left-behind loved ones? What is the significance of CMC to Filipino Diaspora?

Cases were initially selected based on the form of relationships (married or dating; heterosexual or homosexual) as well as that of their long-distance relationships (temporary, permanent, or indefinite). Guided by Hall, the study also required a focus on the sources of inequality between the OFWs and their left-behind loved ones. Such sources of inequality potentially included sex, gender roles, financial status, and educational attainment.

The three OFWs and their left-behind loved ones represent specific types of OFWs. They were also screened using the following criteria: 1) should be no younger than 25 years old (since it was important that they had some knowledge of how life was like before the conveniences of CMC); 2) should have been in a long-distance relationship with someone they had close ties with prior to the separation (disqualifying relationships that began online); 3) should have a loved one also willing to participate in the research, and 4) must have agreed to be interviewed several times in the course of the research.

Due to the highly qualitative nature of the study, informants/respondents had to first agree to share details about their private lives. During the data construction, the researcher found the need to consult two other key informants to provide vital information about Long Distance Relationships (LDRs). They were chosen based on their expertise on complex issues surrounding the cases for needed information on the context of such relationships: Dr. Randy Dellosa, a Filipino psychiatrist and life coach, and Fe Nicodemus, chairperson of a non-governmental organization (NGO) for Filipino migrant workers and their families and the wife of a former OFW based in Saudi Arabia before the emergence of the Internet and cellular phone. The latter's radio programs (broadcast via shortwave to parts of the Middle East) tackled problems of OFWs and their loved ones.

A total of six individuals (four females and two males) served as primary key informants and respondents. All but one had a college degree. Common to them was a conservative Catholic upbringing. All of them were from the middle class. Financial security was their primary consideration for overseas employment. Majority of the key informants working abroad were getting as much as 10 times their regular salaries in the Philippines. Of the three cases, only in one was separation intentionally temporary in nature. The other two viewed their physical distance as indefinite.

I adapted the same communication tools used by primary key informants in their LDRs. Those based abroad at the time of the data construction phase were interviewed via Yahoo! Messenger. Two key informants used web cameras to display their images—allowing me to analyze their synchronous interaction complete with non-verbal communication. Traditional face-to-face focus interviews, meanwhile, were conducted on key informants who were in the Philippines during this phase. All key informants were asked to answer an e-mail survey to provide important background information on their relationships. Data from the interviews were analyzed to come up with three OFW case studies. These will be identified throughout the article as 'Lesbian Partners', 'OFW Nurse and Husband', and 'Male OFW and Wife'.

The Case Studies and Findings

Case One involved lesbian partners in a relationship that started while the two women were teaching in a Catholic school for girls in Taiwan. Already in their late 20s, both were educated in the Philippine Catholic school system which portrayed homosexuality as a sin. One had been publicly open about her sexual preference for years (even prior to overseas employment) while the other only discovered her attraction to the same sex abroad. After a year of co-habiting with her partner in Taiwan, the closet lesbian returned to Manila to avoid scandal. At the time of the data construction, they had been apart for two years. Their case represented OFW relationships facing the further strain of social discrimination by a very conservative Philippine society. Painfully, the closet lesbian was forced to admit her taboo relationship to her disapproving family.

Case Two referred to a married couple in their 30s about to reunite after a year's separation. The wife, a nurse, had left behind her engineer husband and two young children in the Philippines while she worked in a hospital in the United Kingdom. Conveniently, the study began when she was on a month-long vacation to prepare her family for migration. This allowed the researcher to track their shift from long-distance to no-distance relationships. Their case represented the common story of a Filipino mother being torn away from her children due to financial obligations (Lan, 2003; Lindio-McGovern, 2003; Parreñas, 2000; Parreñas, 2005; Santamaria, 1992; Scalabrini Migration Center, 2004). The husband and wife, raised in traditional rural families, also dealt with changes in their gender roles.

Finally, Case Three involved a blue-collar worker in Saudi Arabia and his stay-at-home wife in Manila. They had been apart for six of their 20 years of marriage. Though the husband used to come home twice a year, his visits had become less frequent due to pay cuts. Their children (two sons and a daughter—two of whom were teenagers) were likewise affected by this separation. Like Case Two, their story represented the common struggles of an OFW family (Christensen, 2009; Parreñas, 2005; Scalabrini Migration Center, 2004; Signo, 2007).

Use of Computer-Mediated Communication in Long Distance Relationships

Understandably, CMC changed the nature of the relationships between OFWs and their loved ones in the Philippines. Nicodemus, in hindsight, regretted having fewer communication options during her separation from her husband

in the 1980s. Asked to identify the available tools then, she said that OFWs and their loved ones were confined to the postal service (snail mail—so named for its reputation for sluggishness and unreliability), expensive overseas calls, and voice recording (using cassette tapes sent either via postal service or through an acquaintance who was traveling home).

Key informants agreed that CMC offered them more communication options. Aside from traditional communication media stated above, they were also able to use the Internet (e-mail and online chat with web camera and voice features) and the cellular phone (voice and smart messaging service, or SMS).

Although all of the key informants were in long-distance relationships, they mindfully used new media to improve their relationships. The lesbian partners preferred communicating via cellular voice calls. This allowed them to keep their relationship a secret from suspicious members of the closet lesbian's family as well as from her co-teachers and school officials. It also seemed more ideal to them due to the emotional quality provided by the auditory stimulus. Their exchange of e-mail and text messages, however, was only seen as supplementary to voice calls. Control and preference of communication tools depended on financial capacity. Since the OFW partner had a bigger income, she was expected to initiate phone calls. Her Philippine-based partner, meanwhile, took full advantage of e-mail while limiting her text messages since each one would cost her P13.

For the OFW nurse and her husband, e-mail was most convenient since they had free access to the Internet at their places of work. They were also able to initiate contact without worrying about conflicting time zones. To a much lesser degree, they likewise sent text messages. These were during rare occasions when there was a need for more immediate replies. The OFW husband and his Philippine-based wife, meanwhile, seemed the most dependent on CMC. They preferred chatting via Yahoo! Messenger with a web camera and a microphone. Use of Internet was convenient since the husband had free access at work. His family (more regularly his wife but, sometimes, a few or all of his children) would walk a short distance from their house to a nearby Internet café which charged them P25 per hour of computer use. Often, all members would rent their own computer to communicate with their husband/father simultaneously. They all appreciated this dynamic interaction since it combined visual (via web cam) and auditory (via microphone) stimulation. There were occasions when they exchanged text messages, although this was less attractive due to the cost.

Preference for CMC over traditional communication tools was mainly due to convenience and affordability. Speed was another consideration for key informants who felt that sending snail mail took too much time.

Time concerns were also relative among the cases. The lesbian partners initially set up chatting “dates” but later reverted back to phone calls when their schedules did not jibe. On the other hand, the OFW nurse and her husband exchanged several e-mails in real-time whenever they discovered that they were simultaneously online. But the e-mail chat (a less sophisticated chat format due to the obvious lapse between messages) would not last longer than four or five exchanges due to the demands of their work.

Expectedly, familiarity with communication tools also affected the preference of key informants. During the first month of her arrival in the UK, the Filipina nurse spent more time and money making overseas phone calls since she did not know how to access the Internet. Later, after developing technical skills, she favored e-mail over calls. The same was true for the Philippine-based wife of the blue-collar worker based in Saudi Arabia. She even took computer classes to prepare herself for chatting online. Eventually, from sending numerous text messages, she prioritized her real-time interactions with her husband.

Further confirming results of previous studies (Aguila, 2006; Cabrera & Orbe, 1997; Miller, 2009; Paragas, 2006; Pertierra, 2006; Solis, 2007) all key informants mainly depended on CMC to communicate with their loved ones abroad. Traditional communication tools such as the landline (for overseas calls) and snail mail were not altogether neglected; however, these were only used on special occasions (birthdays, anniversaries, etc.). None of them exchanged voice recordings and these were seen as the most archaic form of communication.

Frequency and coordination of communication

Meanwhile, just like their individual preference for tools, key informants varied in their frequency of CMC use. The main consideration was the state of their relationships.

After their initial interviews, the lesbian partners admitted that they were facing a major crisis. The two were in a dilemma: whether to continue or to terminate their relationship. To reach a decision, they agreed to talk over the phone every day and send e-mails and text messages at least three times a week. Unfortunately, this pact created more conflict since both displayed stereotypical

lesbian roles of butch and femme. The Philippine-based partner, the more “feminine” of the two, was irked by her OFW partner’s irregular calls—something she attributed to the latter’s masculine qualities. This caused her to lash out by sending more e-mails and text messages than was agreed upon. Unfortunately, a sudden rise in emotion-ridden messages may not always be acceptable to all parties. Some may interpret critical assessments of the relationship as virtual nagging (Alexander, 2008). Faced with such a crisis, the more expressive partner was driven by the need to communicate while the confrontation-phobic partner (the OFW) further retreated from the situation.

On the other hand, loneliness compelled the OFW nurse and her husband to exchange several e-mails daily. Frequency of messages was also determined by the need for information. Still conscious of her role as mother, the wife kept tabs on the health and happiness of the kids. She often gave her husband explicit instructions about their medication and doctor’s visits. Although he was technically a single parent in the Philippines, the husband denied taking over the care of the kids. In fact, his wife hired a distant (female) relative to act as nanny while she was away. The frequency and content of the wife’s e-mails proved that she still carried on her parental responsibilities despite the distance. This reflects the persistent social bias that requires Filipino mothers to carry the burden of mothering despite physical distance (Lan, 2003; Lindio-McGovern, 2003; Parreñas, 2000; Parreñas, 2005).

It was the opposite for the OFW husband whose wife rarely informed him of problems regarding their kids. His involvement as a parent, after all, was not as intense as his wife’s. In fact, as the head of the family, he solely decided on the frequency of their communication. This depended more on his availability and convenience. Need for information, unfolding events, and emotional expression were factors that affected the regularity of their communication. Even so, the husband determined the form and regularity of their exchanges. His wife did not challenge this system until he fell unusually silent for several weeks. Her apprehension grew as time passed. From worrying over his health and well-being, she eventually suspected that he was having an affair. Her angry messages still did not get a response until she threatened to get an annulment. Soon after, her husband called to inform her that he was in danger of losing his job. The company he worked for was under new management and employees expected a mass layoff. Differences in their behavior during a crisis, affected by stereotypical gender roles, determined the couple’s frequency of CMC use in the same way as the lesbians and the OFW nurse and her husband.

Generally, key informants had difficulty estimating how often they communicated. The regularity of their CMC use depended on the factors mentioned above. It is in this manner that the findings refute McLuhan's overly deterministic view of communication technology. Although new media's speed and availability often require that its users keep communicating (Aguila, 2006; Kipomaa, 2007; Pertierra, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Solis, 2007), key informants only did so within their comfort zones depending on the situations they faced. However, that such decisions were also made amid the power issues that surrounded their relationships echoes Hall's assumptions that communication media offer venues for negotiations between powerful and subordinate individuals. These will be further elaborated in the next sections.

Disadvantages and Advantages of Computer-Mediated Communication

Although some key informants identified identical disadvantages and advantages of CMC use, most of them looked at the technology based on the uniqueness of their experiences. Key informants agreed that CMC was inferior to face-to-face communication. However, they also believed that CMC was more faithful in recreating FTF communication than other tools available to them. Even the closet lesbian admitted: "No matter what, communication is very important... though CMC is not enough, at least it enables us to keep in touch. It's important just to keep in touch and to know what's going on with the relationship because when you stop communicating, you lose your feelings, your passion, your desire to be with that person. Lack of communication can cause people to drift away."

All three cases emphasized how new media encourage the exchange of trivial information (Kipomaa, 2007; Koskinen, 2007; Ramirez & Broneck, 2009). Small talk (what they ate for dinner or a joke they told at work), however, served a higher purpose. It assured key informants that the distance was not transforming their loved ones into strangers. They were updated about both meaningful and insignificant details. More importantly, nuances of their relationships were kept alive via CMC.

The OFW husband and his Philippine-based wife were also able to flirt via chat through the words they used as well as their non-verbal communication. Their use of web cameras allowed him to blow her kisses while she consciously flipped her hair. She also playfully nagged him about resuming the old habit of smoking while abroad—something that would not have been as apparent without a web cam. The other two couples also showed affection using CMC.

In fact, both the OFW nurse and the Philippine-based lesbian admitted they felt exceptionally thrilled to receive short yet romantic text messages from their respective partners.

Unfortunately, even arguments or heated discussions occurred via CMC. In all three cases, minor or major discussions were carried out using the Internet and cellular phone. Sometimes, as has been noted in previous research by Hine (2000), Aguila (2006), and Vitak (2008), the medium itself added to the conflict due to the lack of non-verbal cues.

The Philippine-based lesbian lamented on the limitations of the technology in truly recreating FTF communication. She insisted:

It's a lot different *talaga*. Iba pa din when it's face-to-face. Even if I can identify her mood in phone calls, it's not enough. I think intimacy... (involves) seeing the person face-to-face. *Iba pa din talaga. Hindi pa din ma-ano ng technology. Minsan iba eh. Ibang-iba talaga.* Like I would clarify things. Like: 'What do you mean by this?' *Nagkakaroon nga ng miscommunication eh. ... Minsan nawawala. Nadide-contextual.*

[It's really very different when it's face-to-face. Even if I can identify her mood in phone calls, it's not enough. I think intimacy... (involves) seeing the person face-to-face. Technology really cannot capture it. It's really different. Like I would clarify things, like 'what do you mean by this?' In fact what happens is miscommunication... when it (the message) is decontextualized.]

Still, all key informants were unconvinced that the technology was exclusively responsible for the success or failure of their close relationships—an opinion shared by many users like them (Baym, et al., 2007; Miller, 2009; Uotinen, 2003). Instead, they believed that the maintenance of their most important LDRs depended on their mindful use of CMC. This, again, challenges McLuhan's over-confidence on technology overpowering individuals.

In fact, there were things the two married couples intentionally kept from each other to avoid arguments despite their constant communication. Such control over communication media—especially on those whose speed and accessibility requires one to constantly communicate—has also been confirmed by other researchers (Aguila, 2006; Kipomaa, 2007; Pertierra, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Solis, 2007).

Interestingly, the ability of CMC to deliver swift and countless messages was not always considered an advantage. The OFW lesbian complained of communication overload since her LDR was in crisis and CMC was a venue for discussing major issues. In their case, the rapid pace of their exchanges led to the demise of their relationship.

The Philippine-based lesbian also emphasized that, sometimes, CMC was a reminder of how much you truly missed loved ones. She said that there were occasions when hearing her partner's voice made her crave for hugs and kisses. To other key informants, however, CMC was able to ease loneliness, increase the desire for reunions, and produce virtual closeness—all of which help in maintaining and improving their relationships.

There were also differences of opinion regarding the privacy offered by CMC. To the husband of the OFW nurse, office e-mail lacked security since their company's IT department had access to everyone's messages. Since he had not revealed his family's plans to migrate, he cautiously avoided any mention of his departure. He would instantly text his wife whenever her e-mails directly or indirectly hinted of their plans. On the other hand, the lesbian couple felt that CMC allowed them to carry out their taboo relationship in secrecy—away from the prying eyes of those who did not approve.

As mentioned earlier, key informants agreed that CMC was limited by the lack of non-verbal cues. This was why they felt it was easier to create conflict and misunderstanding. However, CMC also made it easier to avoid conflict since one could just log off the Internet or switch off their cell phone to end an argument. Conflict was also easily resolved by key informants who either pretended they were not aware of the issue or quickly apologized before things got worse. They said it was much easier to humble themselves via CMC since it allowed them to still save face. In this sense, the distance (time and space) between arguing camps became a plus factor.

In the end, although the advantages and disadvantages seemed to cancel each other out, key informants concurred that CMC was so important to their relationships that the advantages eventually outweighed the disadvantages (Aguila, 2006; Pertierra, 2007a & 2008; Uotinen, 2003). They felt that the limitations of the technology could be addressed by the conscious and empowered use by individuals who should be aware of how to best benefit their particular LDRs. By perceiving themselves as active and not passive users of media, key informants seemed to favor the theory of Hall over that of McLuhan. Thus, how CMC assists or hinders relationships is determined not by the tools but by its users.

Transformations through Computer-Mediated Communication

On the other hand, to say that McLuhan was completely wrong about new media's impact on relationships would be inaccurate. Those in LDRs certainly lack the luxury of having FTF interactions. Instead, they make do with whatever tools allow them to simulate such. Inadvertently, features of their chosen media lead to potential transformations.

Key informants were appreciative of CMC's speed and convenience since these allowed them to have dynamic instead of static relationships. Nicodemus was convinced that key informants were fortunate that technology allowed them to be more actively involved in each other's lives. She recalled having to wait for weeks to receive word from her husband in the Middle East. Comparatively, the OFW nurse felt relieved that even if she was forced to leave behind her young children (ages four and five), she was constantly updated about their development via e-mail. The Philippine-based lesbian confessed that hearing about her partner's daily experiences made her feel connected despite their physical estrangement.

But what do all these mean? How exactly have long-distance relationships been transformed by the use of new media? McLuhan and Hall offer very insightful analysis of the three cases. The features of the available tools (speed, convenience, accessibility, and digitalization of information) gave them the power to control their relationships.

Key informants were reasonably aware of society's bias against LDRs (Helgeson, Shaver & Dyer, 1987; Guldner & Swensen, 1995; Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2007). Even previous research has confirmed that distance (physical or emotional, or both) deeply threatens relationships (Christensen, 2009; Helgeson, et al., 1987; Imre, 2007; Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2007). Key informants were, however, quick to point out that things have certainly changed due to the existence of new media.

In a world where even no-distance relationships now depend highly on mediated communication (Baym, et al., 2007; Cabrera & Orbe, 1999; Coloma & Villa, 1999; Fortunati, 2005; Pertierra, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Portus, 2005; Ramirez & Broneck, 2009), one can easily argue that the quality of LDRs has certainly improved. The likes of Gergen (2002) Fortunati (2002 & 2005) and Pertierra (2005, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008) have aptly labeled the control over time and space by OFWs as "absent presence." Such happens in almost the same manner that McLuhan (1964, p.69) predicted "the technological simulation of consciousness."

Though the above remains the most striking contribution of new media to migration, there is still the danger of assuming that time and space no longer exist (Hiller & Franz, 2004; Taipale, 2007). For key informants, LDRs happen in virtual time and space. The OFW nurse shared:

“Malaking tulong sa amin ang e-mail kasi’yung communication ang importante eh. At least, doon, parang katabi mo lang siya dahil labat-labat ng nangyayari sa iyo, naikukwento mo sa kanya every day.

[E-mail has helped us a lot since communication is important. At least, there, you feel like the other person is right beside you and you can tell him everything that happens to you every day.]”

Being in virtual time and space does not mean complete dislocation from traditional concepts of temporal and geographic location. The three case studies refute past assumptions that public and private domains have been made permeable by new media (Boyd, 2007; Lan, 2003; San Joaquin, 2004; Solis, 2007). Instead, findings suggest that the domains overlap with very perceivable distinctions.

Asked if they have ever had cyber sex, the key informants were both embarrassed and offended by the suggestion. You could never expect such behavior from the OFW nurse and her husband since both were quite conservative. But, emboldened by being in a country where people mainly spoke in English, the nurse wrote hints about missing their physical intimacy in Filipino. Her husband, conscious of his immediate surroundings where everyone was well-versed in the mother tongue, ignored the hints. Among the three couples, you would expect the OFW husband and his Manila-based wife to recreate their physical intimacy. They were, after all, prone to public displays of affection. Despite having been married for many years, they still held hands and kissed in public. Even so, they said cyber sex was out of the question since they were often joined by their children and officemates online. They, however, did not deny having considered cyber sex at some point or another.

Even while key informants could have private exchanges in very public places, they were fully aware of where they were. The closet lesbian only wrote e-mail from her own home, worried that someone could be reading over her shoulder at work. Text messages afforded them more privacy. Nevertheless, she cautiously deleted all traces of their exchanges as soon as they were sent or received. When her lover called her cellphone from Taiwan, she either moved to a more private place (away from prying ears) or carefully made her words “for public consumption.”

New media have become venues and not just tools for relationship maintenance and development (Aguila, 2006; Boyd, 2007; Friedman, 2007; Imre, 2007; Pernia, 2004). They afford us the power to be in multiple locations at the same time—in the here and now, transported to where our loved one is and in a virtual world where we can be together. But, in extending our consciousness, they have also expanded our sub-consciousness. LDRs, in themselves, are inherently predisposed to idealizing (Sahlstein, 2004; Stafford, Merolla & Castle, 2006; Stafford & Merolla, 2007; Yum & Hara, 2005). New media provide virtual and alternative worlds in which individuals can co-exist without necessarily imagining the same things. Put the two together and you get the unexpected: Not simply a continuation of the old relationship or a new relationship altogether but the chance to deal with unmet needs and desires in the FTF relationship (Miller, 2009).

Perhaps the greatest influence of CMC on key informants was its tendency to inspire imagined versions of their relationships. The OFW nurse idealized her e-mail exchanges with her husband as the most honest and open they've ever had in their marriage. Dellosa cautioned that some people have more idyllic relationships via CMC since electronic media plays on the imagination. He emphasized: "We see people not for who they are but for what we want them to be. We don't fall in love with them but the image we create for them. We think that's how they are."

Other scholars (Sahlstein, 2004; Stafford, et al., 2006; Stafford & Merolla, 2007) even go as far as saying that distance becomes a stabilizing factor in LDRs. How else would you explain the chaotic feelings brought on by the interruptions of physical reunions?

The lesbians, particularly, confessed that they had more fights when they were together than when they were apart. It was right after the emotional rollercoaster of a Philippine visit that the Taiwan-based partner decided to end the relationship. A few weeks prior to her vacation, she experienced a traumatic event that caused the accidental death of her student. She explained:

When you're in a relationship, you have to be *THERE** for that person. In our situation, it wasn't possible. After I got back to Taiwan, I was crying a lot. I became so depressed. I missed her. Then, I realized that I had survived something devastating without her and I could surely survive life in general without this. I just couldn't deal with the cycle of being apart and being together and being apart again. I felt it was better to be free.

*Capitalization supplied by the key informant for emphasis.

Even the OFW husband noted that his children seemed more comfortable communicating with him via text or chat than during his visits to Manila. Somehow, CMC provides users with the courage to exchange uncomfortable messages that they would never think of expressing in their FTF interactions (Pertierra, 2007a, 2007b; Signo, 2007; Solis, 2007).

Essentially, there are two ways in which new media offers users control in their relationships—through the power of revelation and concealment. Subordinate individuals finally express themselves to their superior loved ones without fear of rejection. Both the OFW nurse and the closet lesbian were grateful that they could finally ventilate their thoughts and emotions to their usually unreceptive partners. The former explained:

“I keep sending him e-mail even if he hasn’t replied yet. *Kasi kapag e-mail, hindi ka mai-interrupt eh. Kasi kapag magkasama kayo, minsan nakakalimutan mo na ang sasabihin mo kasi may bigla syang sinisingit.* [With e-mail, you don’t get interrupted. Because when you are together, you forget what to say when the other person interrupts your train of thought.]”

The same was true for the closet lesbian who bombarded her partner with e-mails whenever she felt the need to express herself. Being finally able to say what she wanted to say, at the time she needed it the most, was liberating in itself. The relief of ventilation was reward enough even if she knew that the receiver managed to delay or, worse, pay little attention to her messages.

Still, key informants emphasized that CMC provided them the feeling of empowerment in their relationships. A major contribution of the technology was its ability to provide them access to their separated loved ones at any time of the day. They were no longer victims of the distance created by time and space. Conceptually, CMC gave them the power to overcome physical and emotional separation.

Furthermore, key informants were able to negotiate the roles they played and the issues they faced in their relationships. Predictably, all but one female key informant (the butch lesbian based in Taiwan) played the subservient role in the relationship. CMC provided these women a means to express their thoughts and feelings about the inequality of their status. Compelled by the technology to reply, their more dominant partners had to give in to some of their demands. This was most apparent in the case of the lesbian couple whose communication via Internet and cellular phone decided the fate of their

partnership. For weeks, the two went back and forth as one wanted to salvage their relationship while the other wanted to give up. Eventually, they decided to part ways and terminate their communication.

Another change introduced by CMC was the speed in the development or deterioration of the key informants' relationships. The Taiwan-based lesbian admitted that she expected their breakup would be more grueling. Instead, it happened more quickly and cleanly than in her past relationships. This is in line with Walther's revision of his Social Information Processing Theory (as cited in Griffin, 2000). Walther later realized that instead of new media slowing down real-time interactions, they actually mimic if not surpass the speed of face-to-face interactions. Because the communication between the troubled lesbians was more frequent and meaningful than in their FTF interactions, the resolution of their crisis happened more rapidly. The same could be said of the OFW nurse and her husband whose relationship showed marked improvement through CMC. Not denying that distance may have made her husband's heart grow fonder, she insisted that he was more sensitive to her feelings and more expressive of his during their separation. She felt more "heard" when they exchanged e-mails than when they were together. Unfortunately, they reverted back to their old ways after their reunion in the UK. He, ironically, became more distant despite the physical proximity.

Naturally, there were limits to "absent presence" (Gergen, 2002). Virtual intimacy was never enough for the key informants who were all engaged in romantic relationships.

Dellosa, a psychiatrist, acknowledged that the qualities of CMC (speed, convenience, and physical detachment) make it conducive to self-disclosure. Proof of this was how the timid husband of the OFW nurse seemed more demonstrative via CMC than in real life. Suddenly, he was sweet and thoughtful—no longer embarrassed to text "I miss you and I love you." He was also unexpectedly verbose in his e-mails. While his wife appreciated these changes, she was careful not to credit the tools for the transformation. Instead, she believed that distance simply made him realize her worth.

However, Dellosa and Nicodemus also warned that physical separation may sometimes cause individuals to censor their self-disclosure. This was especially true of the married couples who deliberately kept information from their spouses. The wife of the OFW husband often dealt with serious issues regarding their children as if she were a single parent. She felt that it was unnecessary to share the burden with her husband who could do nothing, anyway, to help. In

contrast, her husband also decided to face his employment crisis on his own since she could not solve the problem. The OFW nurse seemed much more straightforward, although she did not complain as much about homesickness and loneliness to her husband than she did with her co-nurses in the UK.

Insightfully, Nicodemus likened having an OFW spouse to being widowed. “You mourn the loss of your loved one but it’s a more painful loss because you know that he’s alive but not by your side,” she explained.

All of the above demonstrate how deeply long distance relationships have been transformed by the technology. While there is still some pessimism about the fate of LDRs, new media have made migration more acceptable than ever before. The Internet and mobile phone have given distant individuals the means to not only manage and maintain their connection but also to negotiate their roles through time.

Conclusions

Analyses of the three case studies showed that CMC was at the heart of the key informants’ relationships. While the Internet and cellular phone can neither be credited nor blamed for the eventual development or demise of their associations, the mindful use, abuse, or misuse of the tools deeply affected the said relationships.

Key informants all agreed that CMC was crucial to the maintenance of their relationships. In fact, both the Internet and cellular phone served not only as tools but as venues for the enactment of their LDRs. They were, on the other hand, aware that each individual exercised power and control over CMC. Their loved ones made calculated choices about what tools to use and how often to use them. Thus, messages were assumed to have conscious intent. Both the frequency and lack of communication were interpreted to have special meaning.

Of course, none of them felt that the strengths and issues in their relationships were injected by the technology. They knew that the future of their bond depended more on how they handled past dealings as well as present ones. However, the speed and convenience of the Internet and cellular phone magnified strengths and issues which improved or deteriorated their relationships at a faster rate.

CMC’s ability to more closely mimic FTF interactions, in short, lessened the feeling of helplessness among key informants. They were assured of greater

control over their LDRs. Physical separation could no longer hinder the growth or decline of relationships. On the one hand was its ability to surpass the limits of time and space as proposed by McLuhan. A more significant contribution involved the empowerment of otherwise marginalized groups like women as foreseen by Hall. There could no better example of the critical use of media than the key informants' tendency to negotiate their relationships through the mobile phone and Internet. Resistance to the power base in their relationships was seen in all three case studies.

Still, the most significant contribution of CMC to the relationships of the key informants was their greater acceptance of migration. They credited CMC for their more optimistic view of overseas employment. Somehow, they felt that the sacrifices made in the name of financial security were no longer as overwhelming as they were before the existence of the Internet and cellular phone.

Unfortunately, the question that still persists is: "How are the changes introduced through CMC translated to the no-distance relationships of the key informants?" The answer, based on the experiences of the key informants, is a confusing mix of positive and negative. Even so, countless Filipinos have no other choice than to depend on CMC for the survival of their long-distance relationships.

Given that both Hall and McLuhan offer more optimistic outcomes, there is still a possibility that humans can overcome the obstacles of migration through the use of communication technology. This is, perhaps, the only consolation for Filipino society when faced with continued fragmentation due to migration.

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