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# Connection as a Form of Resisting Control: mobile phone usage of foreign domestic workers in Singapore

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# Connection as a Form of Resisting Control

## Foreign Domestic Workers' Mobile Phone Use in Singapore

Domestic workers toil in situations akin to "total institution" (Goffman, 1961) where mobile phones emerge as a new vehicle for resistance against employers' control and social isolation (Sun, 2006), as well as maintaining distant relationships and local social networks (Thompson, 2009). Through a survey and interviews with 68 female foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Singapore, this study further investigates FDWs' mobile phone usage for professional and personal communication with employers, family overseas and local friends. The findings show that FDWs have distinctive patterns for professional and personal use, including topics, time, and length of communication. They tend to use mobile phones more for connecting with family and friends than communicating with employers. Text messaging is the most popular function while voice calls are used only for emergencies or special occasions. Finally, cost, ease of use and attractive packages are key factors affecting FDWs' selection of mobile services.

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The use of mobile phones affects the personal and professional lives of users directly and indirectly (Katz and Aakhus, 2002), thus providing a window of opportunity to examine the complex interplay between technology, social groups and social control (Katz et al., 2004). Foreign domestic workers (FDWs) belong to a special social group who mainly use mobile phones for work and personal communication with local communities and families in home countries.

In 2008, one in six families in Singapore hired a foreign domestic worker and about 170,000 women, mostly from the Philippines and Indonesia, were employed here (Wong, 2008). Most of them are live-in maids whose domestic work only allows limited interaction with the host society and have strong constraints on mobility, living status, and social activities. Sun (2006) described FDWs' working conditions as similar to Goffman's (1961) notion of total institution. However, the use of mobile phones may have made distinctive changes to their previously isolated working lives (Sun, 2006; Thompson, 2009). As

mobile phones and services became more affordable for the low-income FDWs, they shifted from being a marginalised group into potential mobile customers. Various mobile phone schemes are currently offered by Singapore's telcos to cater specifically to FDWs.

Previous studies have highlighted two inter-related dimensions of FDWs' mobile usage: control and connection. Some regard mobile phones as a new vehicle of FDWs' resistance against employers' control and social isolation (Sun, 2006). Others view using mobile phones as a crucial communication mode for this social group to maintain the connection to home and reach out to other migrant co-nationals to develop local social networks (Thompson, 2009). The availability of mobile telephony makes it possible for FDWs to manage and maintain long-distance and local relationships through instantaneous voice communication and asynchronous text messages.

Affordable mobile telephony provides opportunities for Singapore's FDWs to achieve temporal and spatial simultaneity (Paragas, 2009), such as playing the distant mothering role (Hicks, 2009). However, only a small but increasing number are allowed to carry mobile phones, as most Singapore employers think mobile phones are counterproductive to maids' work because of unnecessary distractions from FDWs' homes or local communities (Sun, 2006). This study aims to investigate Singapore's FDWs' mobile phone usage for professional and personal use and their strategies to maintain connection and resist control. We conducted a survey and structured interviews with 68 FDWs during December 2009 to March 2010 in order to have a more nuanced understanding of migrant domestic workers' routine use of mobile phones. This

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study contributes to the emerging literature regarding the impact of mobile phone use on specific social groups and their social relations. The empirical data also reveals the patterns and reasons for mobile phone use among migrant domestic workers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### FDWs' mobile phone use in Singapore

Since the 1980s, the level of labour migration within and from Asia has increased tremendously (Huang and Yeoh, 2003) and has kept growing in recent years. Asia's low-skilled migrant labour constitutes a substantial proportion of the workforce and contributes to capital accumulation in many countries (Thompson, 2005). Southeast Asia is home to the world's largest low-skilled migrant labour surplus nations (Indonesia and the Philippines) and large labour-receiving countries (Singapore and Malaysia) (Huang and Yeoh, 2003). In the Asia-Pacific region, transnational labour migration is a multi-faceted issue and an evolving phenomenon. The export and import of domestic helpers is not simply a market-driven economic transaction but also has impact on socio-cultural relations between individuals, households, and societies (Yeoh, Huang, and Gonzalez, 1999).

The number of foreign domestic workers in Singapore has grown dramatically from 5,000 in 1978 to 180,000 in 2008 (Reisman, 2009: 186). Usually FDWs who are perceived as a mixed blessing are invisible and marginalised in the host societies (Huang and Yeoh, 2003). Live-in FDWs have shaped the family roles of transnational families in affluent countries like Singapore (Huang and Yeoh, 2003). Female labour migration, particularly married women with children, fills the void left in their employers' families but this usually causes other social problems. Although migrant domestic workers as a marginalised group only appear in limited public spaces in Singapore, these women generate different styles and strategies in the use of public domains (Yeoh and Huang, 1998). Nowadays, more and more domestic workers carry mobile phones for professional and personal reasons.

In Singapore's saturated mobile phone market, SingTel, M1 and StarHub have been targeting foreign workers for revenue growth. They are viewed as a consumer niche for mobile communication services (Thompson, 2005). Since 2003, the three telcos have been pushing their marketing strategies, such as offering special phone rates and organising creative campaigns, to win over FDWs as international calling card and prepaid mobile phone customers (Lee, 2005). Price-conscious foreign workers are keen users of prepaid mobile phone cards. After 2008, the three telcos started taking aggressive marketing approaches to appeal to foreign workers, the only growth segment in Singapore where mobile phone penetration is 130 per cent (Siow, 2008).

Moreover, since Singapore's telecommunication network started its global short message service (SMS) in April 2000, SMS traffic has soared. The telcos believe that foreign workers and foreign domestic maids sent the

majority of the SMS messages because global SMS offered a cheap and alternative way of communication (Goh, 2001). Also, cheap mobile phones with basic functions that cost less than S\$100 (US\$76.60) with no binding contracts were very popular in the 2008 mobile phone market: one in every six of the 2.7 million mobile phones shipped to Singapore was a budget phone (Tan, 2009). Foreign workers are one of the major social groups who purchase these economic mobile phones.

Furthermore, mobile phones have become a symbol of higher socioeconomic status. To FDWs, the mobile phone is a high-value commodity. Migrant workers showed knowledge of the various telephony options available and chose the cost-effective ones to serve their needs for work, relationship maintenance, and socialising (Pranata, 2009). They learnt how to creatively manipulate the system to make mobile services more affordable. Singapore's FDWs also use strategies to manage mobile phone-mediated social networks like maximising access, controlling costs and desires, and keeping relationships (Thompson, 2009). As mobile phones bring both possibilities and problems, FDWs must exercise self-control and employ strategies to use mobile phones appropriately.

### FDWs' work, control and mobile phone use

According to Sun (2006), live-in maids whose work and personal lives are isolated from the host society are situated in a similar context as Goffman's (1961) "total institution". It is defined as "a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life" (Goffman, 1961: 11). This kind of domestic work condition is described as "soul-destroying hollowness" (Clark-Lewis, 1996) because nearly all aspects of a domestic helper's life are monitored and controlled. This isolation discourages the development of FDWs' support systems, leading to their vulnerability and reluctance to voice out negative emotions (Cheng, 1996). Besides, there is a power struggle between the employers and the maids. Prior studies in East and Southeast Asia have highlighted various control strategies adopted by employers (Chin, 1998). Some employers use ways to terrify, humiliate, or immobilise the FDWs to make them obedient (Cheng, 1996).

Thus, small mobile phones with text messaging capabilities are ideal for covert communication among confined FDWs, preventing them from being totally controlled by their employers (Sun, 2006; Thompson, 2009). There is potential for mobile phones to emerge as a new vehicle of resistance to effectively create virtual privacy and facilitate the formation of companionship in workers' struggles against employers' total control and social isolation in the world of paid domestic labour (Sun, 2006; 16–17).

Sun's (2006) study disclosed that Singapore's employers restricted FDWs' mobile phone use, including calling overseas families and local friends. She found these helpers managed to find ways—such as secretly owning

a mobile phone, using the SMS function, and calling at hours when they are not under supervision—to maintain relationships and build networks. To resist the control, some helpers used mobile phones secretly without their employers' knowledge (Sun, 2006) and others primarily used affordable SMS to communicate with family and friends strategically (Thompson, 2009).

Mobile phones are usually regarded as an item of privilege given by the employers (Thompson, 2005), hence FDWs' mobile phone usage is still more or less constrained by employers. Due to the prevalence of mobile telephony in Singapore's society, whether employers should allow their helpers to have mobile phones and whether employers are aware of their helpers' use of mobile phones are interesting research topics in the FDWs' domain. The usage of mobile phones by FDWs is an indication of the power relationship between employers and of domestic helpers' struggle for subjectivity and freedom in communication. Even in the cases where employers allow their FDWs to own mobile phones, informal rules are usually applied to limit the frequency and length of usage.

#### **FDWs' communication and mobile phone use**

Nowadays, community ties are geographically dispersed, specialised, and connected by information technology, including mobile telephony (Katz et al., 2004). Mobile phone use is indeed a crucial mode of building individual social networks among families, friends, and colleagues, both near and far (Katz, 2001; Ling, 2003). In the networked society, strong-tied relationships like family and close friends show more intimacy, self-disclosure, reciprocal activities and kinship (Granovetter, 1983) and tend to maintain frequent contact and share resources with each other (Garton et al., 2006). In a study by Julsrud et al. (2009), the mobile phone is found to be used as a tool to support stronger ties and internal work coordination.

Prior studies regarding FDWs' use of the mobile phone showed how mobile communication has evolved from shaping the marginalised FDW social group and connecting its members to an irreplaceable normalisation tool in their lives (Thompson, 2005). The proliferation of mobile phones has transformed transnational migrants' lives and affected their national, migrant, gender and class identities (Thompson, 2009). Building and maintaining communities is one of the significant impacts of mobile phone usage on foreign workers. Qiu and Cartier's study (2007) regarding the network mobility of China's working class found that mobile phones offer a new means for these domestic migrants to strengthen and extend their social networks, including information-based migration and place-based networking. Although some research claims that mobile phones accelerate a process of social and psychological individualisation, for Singapore's foreign workers, mobile phone use fosters their connection and maintains strong ties with distant families and local communities. Networking via mobile phones can instantiate foreign worker communities by offering help lines and social activities (Thompson, 2005).

Viewing mobile phone use as a catalyst for social change, Pranata's study (2009) examined the impacts of overseas migrant workers using mobile phones to communicate with their home families and found that the family ties were maintained by phone calls and text messages. Less disrupting and affordable text messaging was preferred to direct voice communication (Sun, 2006; Pranata, 2009; Thompson, 2009). Besides, using SMS can overcome language barriers and transcend the boundaries of communities (Thompson, 2005). Hence, the availability of mobile voice calls and text messaging enables FDWs to manage and maintain long-distance relationships almost in real time.

#### **METHOD**

This research aims to find out how Singapore's FDWs use their mobile phones for three different relations: work-related use, maintaining relationships with family and friends in the home country, and communicating with local social networks. Methodologically, this study's primary sources consist of a pencil-and-paper survey and interview data, and the survey questionnaire and structured interview questions were developed in early 2010. Done with a convenient sampling process, the survey was designed to delineate the nature and characteristics of FDWs' mobile phone usage, while the structured interview data would provide an in-depth understanding of FDWs' routine use of mobile phones and their reasons. With three sets of identical questions, the survey investigated FDWs' mobile phone usage for the three relations by comparing the quantitative results. The qualitative interviews looked at four aspects: (a) FDWs' perceived life changes after using mobile phones in regard to the three social relations; (b) their mobile phone user patterns with the three relations; (c) reasons for selecting mobile phone services; and (d) occasions and subjects to use mobile voice rather than SMS. The interviews were conducted near the respondents' workplaces or their Sunday gathering places (e.g. Orchard Road, Lucky Plaza and Sultan Mosque). As the FDWs tended to feel dubious toward interviews, two FDWs were trained as interviewers in order to gain their trust and increase rapport, and all the interviews were recorded for transcription and subsequent analysis.

During December 2009 to March 2010, 68 domestic helpers and mobile phone users completed the questionnaires and interviews. Eighty-eight per cent of the respondents were Filipinos. Filipinos have been a special focus of Singapore's telcos, as they are one of the biggest foreign nationality groups. As their English is typically better compared to other groups of domestic helpers, they are more capable of adjusting themselves in Singapore and maintaining local networks to provide emotional and financial support, facilitate job searches, and assist in practical negotiations with employers and agencies. Filipino maids tend to have better salaries compared with other nationalities and can afford to own mobile phones.

The respondents' answers to the close-ended

questions were all coded and the SPSS programme was used to obtain analyses such as frequencies for specific variables. The quantitative data obtained from a small amount of snowball sampling aims to describe the emerging phenomenon so that the relevant information in this exploratory study can be quickly understood and appreciated. The main purpose of the quantitative analysis was to identify patterns in the responses in order to illustrate the relative salience of a particular type of response. In-depth understanding of the responses were then elucidated by qualitative data (i.e. the respondents' replies to open-ended "why" questions.) All the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and examined by thematic data analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The identified themes include life changes after using mobile phones, mobile phone user patterns, reasons for service selection, as well as occasions and subjects for using voice calls rather than text messaging.

### QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

This study uses mainly descriptive statistics to portray whether and how mobile phone usage varies empirically by the users' social relations. The descriptive statistics which do not use random sampling is suitable for the exploratory study (Healey, 2009). The quantitative analyses include three segments: (a) the FDWs' perceptions of three social relations under investigation; (b) comparative mobile phone usage across the three social relations (FDWs with employers, FDWs with family overseas, and FDWs with local friends), and (c) FDWs' subjective reasons for using mobile phones.

#### Measurement of key variables

##### *Perceived social relations*

We are interested in three types of social relations: relations with employers, relations with family overseas, and relations with local friends. We included items concerning the respondents' subjective perceptions of these relationships; they were asked to rank their agreement with the following statements on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly Agree):

- My employer and I have a good relationship
- My employer controls my life
- I feel alone and apart from the local society when I work in Singapore
- I maintain close relationships with my family and friends in my country

##### *Mobile phone usage*

To measure this variable, respondents were asked to answer the following six questions regarding their usage of mobile phones (multiple-choice answers were possible and coded accordingly):

1. What kind of phone services are you using?  
(Prepaid mobile phone cards with Singapore mobile operator; prepaid mobile phone cards with foreign mobile operator; monthly paid (postpaid) mobile

phone; employer's land line (domestic phone); public phone; international calling cards)

2. How do you communicate with your employers/ family/friends?  
(Mostly voice call; mostly send/receive SMS; mostly home phone; mostly public phone; other)
3. How long is your total mobile calling time (initiated and received) per day on average?  
(0–5 minutes; 5–15 minutes; 15–30 minutes; 30–60 minutes; more than 60 minutes)
4. How many short message service messages (SMS) do you send/receive per day on average?  
(0; 1–10; 10–20; above 20)
5. What time of day do you usually use your mobile phone?  
(Morning; Afternoon; Evening; Night Time)
6. Who pays the phone bills (at the time of the interview)?  
(Myself; My employer; My parents or relatives; Other)

In order to analyse the usage of mobile phones in these three structural relations, these six questions were repeated for each of the three different social relations in the survey questionnaire.

##### *Reasons for using mobile phones*

In addition to understanding how mobile phone usage might be a function of objective structural relations (e.g. communicating with employers, family members and friends), this study also includes items that measure the subject's own reasons for using mobile phones. Respondents were asked to rank their reasons for using mobile phones: Question: What are the most important reasons for you to use a mobile phone? Possible answers: Maintain relationship with family and friends in my own country; Make new local friends; Exchange useful information; Reduce loneliness and isolation; Other reasons). A five-point scale was used, where 1 was "the most important" and 5 was "the least important".

### Quantitative results

#### *Respondents' profile*

The 68 female respondents were aged between 23 and 39, with an average age of 31. With respect to the respondents' family situation at the time of the interview, 45.6 per cent of the respondents were never married, 44.1 per cent of the respondents were married, 8.8 per cent of the respondents were separated, and 1.5 per cent of the respondents were divorced. Concerning the respondents' personal monthly income, none earned less than S\$200 per month, 2.9 per cent of the respondents earned below S\$250 per month, 25 per cent of the respondents earned between S\$250–\$349 per month, 67.6 per cent of the respondents earned between S\$350–700 per month, and 1.5 per cent of the respondents had an income above S\$700 per month; two respondents declined to reveal their income level. Details are shown in Table 1.

With respect to how long the respondents had worked as FDWs in Singapore, the years ranged from one to 19 years, with an average of 4.5 years. Respondents have worked for the current employers for between less than

TABLE 1  
Descriptive statistics of the respondents

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
Age	68	23.00	39.00	30.9853	3.7236
Marital status	68	1.00	4.00	1.6765	0.7006
Personal income	66	2.00	5.00	3.6970	0.5539
Time working as a domestic helper	68	1.00	19.00	4.4474	3.0988
Time working for the current employer	67	0.00	13.00	2.0818	1.9423
Highest education degree obtained	67	1.00	5.00	3.2090	1.2856
Nationality of current employer	68	1.00	12.00	6.3529	3.7487

one to 13 years, with an average of 2.8 years. As far as their educational level was concerned, 1.5 per cent of the respondents had primary school education, 42.6 per cent of the respondents were high school graduates, 13.2 per cent of the respondents were vocational school graduates, 16.2 per cent of the respondents attended pre-university colleges, 25 per cent of the respondents had a bachelor's degree, and one respondent did not specify her educational qualification. Twenty-seven respondents had Singaporean employers while 41 respondents had employers who were foreigners in Singapore.

For mobile phone usage, the respondents had used mobile phones for 4.5 years on average. Fifty-four per cent of the respondents only had one mobile phone number, while 41 per cent of the respondents had two mobile phone numbers and four per cent had three. In addition, 46 per cent of the respondents never changed their phone number, while 31 per cent changed their mobile numbers at least once, 15 per cent changed their numbers at least twice, and nine per cent changed three times or more. The majority (70.1 per cent) used prepaid mobile phone cards offered by Singapore mobile operators for work or personal purposes.

#### *Comparing mobile usage across three social relationships*

In this section, we analyse FDWs' mobile phone use patterns and strategies when communicating with the three social relations (work, distant families, and local friends). Table 2 shows that the FDWs used mobile phone primarily for personal purposes. More than half (52.9 per cent) used the phone "exclusively for communicating with family in the home country" and slightly more than one quarter of respondents (26.5 per cent) selected "equally for personal life and work purposes". Only a few reported using mobile phones more for work than for personal

TABLE 2  
Respondents' subjective reasons for using mobile phones

For what purposes do you use your mobile phone?	
Exclusively for communicating with local friends	1.5%
Exclusively for communicating with family in the home country	52.90%
More for personal life than for work purposes	4.4%
Equally for personal life and for work purposes	26.5%
More for work than for personal life	7.4%

life (7.4 per cent).

Furthermore, in terms of significant reasons for using mobile phones for personal life, the majority of respondents (88.3 per cent) chose "maintaining relationship with family and friends in the home country", while a few regarded "exchanging useful information" (4.4 per cent) or "reducing loneliness and isolation" (4.4 per cent) as the most important reasons. The quantitative analysis indicates that the FDWs use mobile phone particularly for keeping in contact with their families in their home countries.

In addition, as shown in Table 3, on the one hand, respondents are more likely to call their family on their mobile phones (29.4 per cent) as compared to calling their employers (11.8 per cent) or their friends (11.8 per cent). On the other hand, the usage of SMS as the predominant form of communication is rather consistent across three social groups (employer: 39.7 per cent; family: 30.9 per cent; friends: 51.5 per cent).

TABLE 3  
The use of mobile phone in the contexts of various social relationships

How do you communicate with your (employers/distant family/local friends)?	Employer	Family	Friends
Mostly voice call (mobile phone)	11.80%	29.40%	11.80%
Mostly send/receive SMS messages	39.70%	30.90%	51.50%
Mostly home phone	17.60%	1.50%	0.00%
Mostly public phone	0.00%	1.50%	1.50%

TABLE 4  
Length of mobile phone voice calls within the contexts of various social relationships

How long is your total mobile calling time (initiated and received) on average per day with your (employers/distant family/local friends)?	Employer	Family	Friends
0–5 minutes	45.60%	7.40%	17.60%
5–15 minutes	26.50%	50%	44.10%
15–30 minutes	20.60%	30.90%	23.50%
30–60 minutes	1.50%	8.80%	2.90%
More than 60 minutes	4.40%	1.50%	10.30%

In Table 4, we see that the calling time to their employers also tended to be relatively short (45.6 per cent of the calls are completed within 0–5 minutes) as compared to calling time to their family members (7.4 per cent of the calls are completed within 0–5 minutes) and friends (17.6 per cent of the calls are completed within 0–5 minutes). In contrast, calling time to friends and family tend to be long (13.2 per cent of calls to friends and 10.3 per cent of calls to family last more than 30 minutes) compared to employers (5.9 per cent of calls to employers are more than 30 minutes). The findings suggest that FDWs tend to make longer calls with their stronger-tied relationships.

Respondents tend to call their family and friends in the afternoons or evenings, and tend to call their employers in the mornings, as indicated in Table 5. The analyses reveal that FDWs’ mobile phone usage patterns (use of voice calls, duration of calls and time for mobile phone use) differ for professional and personal use.

As far as FDWs’ expenditures on mobile phones are concerned, only one out of the 68 respondents spent more than S\$100 per month; almost half of the respondents (46.3 per cent) spent less than S\$30 a month, another significant portion (43.3 per cent) spent between

S\$31–\$60 per month, and the rest (nine per cent) spent between S\$61–\$100 per month on mobile phone usage. Table 6 suggests that while most respondents pay for their mobile phone bills by themselves, their employers sometimes pay for work-related mobile phone bills.

The results also show FDWs use text messaging intensively for both professional and personal purposes, as shown in both Table 3 above and Table 7 below. Table 3 shows that SMS is the most frequent mode of mobile communication with the employers (39.7 per cent), distant family (30.9 per cent), and local friends (51.5 per cent). Table 7 suggests that the number of SMS messages that respondents send and receive on a typical day is similar across the three types of social relations. The majority (80–90 per cent) of SMS messages received on a typical day is below 20 in each type of social relationship, but adding them up easily exceeds 30 messages per day. Sending or receiving one to 10 SMS messages is most common across the three social relations. However, the FDWs tended to send/receive more text messages to employers (23.5 per cent to send/receive 10–20 SMSs) compared with the other two relations.

The above analyses show that text messaging is most popular function in mobile phones used by FDWs.

TABLE 5  
Time of mobile phone use within the contexts of various social relationships

What time of the day do you usually use your mobile phone for communicating with your (employers/distant family/local friends)?	Employer	Family	Friends
Morning	10.30%	2.90%	0.00%
Afternoon	26.50%	14.70%	10.30%
Evening	32.40%	63.20%	76.50%
Multiple choices	30.90%	19.12%	13.20%

TABLE 6  
Paying for mobile phone use within the contexts of various social relationships

Who pays the phone bills for (work, communicating with distant family, communicating with local friends)?	Work	Family	Friends
Myself	80.90%	92.6%	94.10%
My employer	13.20%	0%	1.50%
My parents or relatives	0%	4.40%	1.50%
Other	1.50%	1.50%	0%

TABLE 7  
Frequency of mobile SMS usage across various social relationships

How many SMS messages do you send/receive for work/from your family or local friends per day on average?	Employer	Family	Friends
0	10.30%	2.90%	1.50%
1–10	57.40%	73.50%	63.20%
10–20	23.50%	19.10%	22.10%
> 20	8.80%	4.40%	13.20%

However, interestingly, the FDWs, in fact, used voice calls almost as frequently as text messages when they communicated with family in the home country. It is different from the findings in previous studies that suggest that FDWs used text messages dominantly regardless of relations or other concerns (Sun, 2006; Thompson, 2009). The explanation could be that as the FDWs regarded the maintenance of strong ties with family/friends in the home country as highly important (55 per cent considered it as the most significant reason to use the mobile phone for personal matters), they did not mind the cost of voice calls, as hearing their loved ones provided irreplaceable emotional value and sense of telepresence.

### QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The qualitative analyses of the interview data mainly focus on four segments: 1) changes with regard to the three social relations after using mobile phones; 2) duration of mobile phone usage with the three social relations; 3) reasons to select mobile phone services; and 4) occasions and subjects to use mobile voice rather than SMS.

#### Changes in interaction with the three social relations after using mobile phones

With regard to communication with employers, the majority of domestic helpers (83.8 per cent) found it easier and more convenient to use mobile phones. The calls or SMS messaging with employers were mainly related to housework, especially children and meals. The FDWs stressed the significance of instant communication with their employers anytime and anywhere. With mobile phones, they are able to inform employers about conditions at home almost immediately. For example, Respondent 2 often used her mobile phone to update her employers about the children's conditions at home. Other matters communicated at work were mainly everyday issues, such as preparing meals and getting permission to go out. Respondent 37 indicated, "It makes work easier because at least they won't restrict me from using my handphone when needed." As the employers realised the necessity of allowing FDWs to carry a phone for work, it also benefited the FDWs in their personal communication with people locally and in their own countries.

When answering how using mobile phones changed interaction with their families overseas and their local friends, the FDWs showed more affective responses, unlike the homogenous responses to work-oriented, employer-employee communication. Most respondents

expressed that using the mobile phones allowed them to connect with family easily, eased their worries and reduced the feeling of homesickness.

As long as I'm using handphone, I make my life so easy. Because through my handphone, I can communicate with my family anytime. I can reduce homesickness and loneliness (Respondent 36).

Hearing my family's voice across a thousand miles is a big help for me. Gave me strength to ease my loneliness, burden and boredom (Respondent 42).

The majority called and sent messages to keep track of the life situations of their parents, partners and children. Some contacted their families to check if the money they remitted had been received. Others reassured their families that they were doing fine in Singapore, like Respondent 65 telling her daughter that they "are all fine with God's blessing".

Communicating with local friends was the primary way for FDWs to relieve loneliness and homesickness as they could talk or SMS each other easily (44.1 per cent).

My local social life after using a handphone is quite ok because it helps my life lessen the burden that I'm thinking and also my homesickness with my family (Respondent 36).

Nearly one-third of the respondents felt much happier after communicating with friends. The respondents also disclosed that they used mobile phones to share about their lives and problems, make friends, relieve stress and kill time. They often sent greetings to each other, asking about each other's well-being. Their communication topics discussed included work, family, love life, gossip, greetings, and coordinating chores or meetings. Some asked about each other's employers as well, for example Respondents 50 and 52, indicating the concern and support they showed for fellow domestic workers in a foreign land.

#### Reasons for using mobile phones for work, family and local friends

Most FDWs used their mobile phones as and when needed. However, the most important principle ruling the use of mobile phones was that it should not influence their work performance, especially in the eyes of their employers.

My employers are not a "devil-type" of person. They allow me to use it anytime as long as it won't affect my work (Respondent 42).



Anytime because I think using handphone is not a crime as long as you know your limitations and rest assure that it won't affect my work (Respondent 33).

When communicating with family and friends, the FDWs became more time-conscious. The FDWs often used mobile phones for personal reasons in their free time, such as in the evening after they finished the housework and when the calling and text messaging became cheaper during those hours. This is probably because mobile service providers tailored the mobile packages offered to FDWs to maximise their common free time after work.

### Reasons for choice of mobile phone service providers

As shown in the quantitative result, the FDWs dominantly used prepaid mobile phone cards offered by Singapore mobile operators for mobile communication. The most popular service providers among the FDWs are SingTel and StarHub due to their less expensive rates and more appealing plans (e.g. free SMS, free incoming calls) (Respondents 12, 17 and 28). The major reasons for them selecting a mobile service include cheaper rates, ease of use, and attractive deals.

### Occasions for mobile calls and SMS

Mobile voice calls and text messages have different characteristics: the former provides more communication and emotional cues and satisfaction, requires real-time interaction, and costs more. When asked to choose between the two for communication, more than half of the interviewees used mobile voice calls to get quick responses for emergency situations and one-third of them used it to express their care and love on special occasions, with the consideration that voice calls were more expensive than text messaging.

There's emergency sometimes I use mobile call for my family, because they ask me to call for need to help to send money (Respondent 1).

I called during birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas, New Year's, etc. To express my love to them even though I am not in their side, I'm still thinking and care about them (Respondent 61).

It is interesting to note that almost all respondents (98.5 per cent) chose to use mobile voice or text messaging while assuming that the communicative purposes were personal, not work-related. As a result of the affordable price, the majority sent SMS messages frequently to their families in the distance and local friends, and only a few still showed their concern about cost. Slightly more than two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they sent SMS messages every day or every other day for normal occasions.

Normal occasion. Normally everyday, I send SMS to my family and greet them, "Have a nice day." It is cheap way to communicate with them (Respondent 64).

One important reason for the FDWs choosing to use

text messaging primarily is affordability. More than half of the respondents regarded the cost of text messaging as low.

As for the topics communicated by using voice calls or SMS, the FDWs tended to talk about more serious issues like family problems, money issues, and parental or romantic relationships via voice calls. This might be due to the fact that mobile voice calls facilitate immediate responses and emotional exchange, which are necessary for discussing serious issues or maintaining close relationships. In contrast, more than half of the FDWs frequently used SMS messages to convey general information and greetings.

Anything under the sun. I'm the kind of person who loves to know and share not everything but at least half of the things happening in my everyday life (Respondent 42).

Similar to prior studies (Sun, 2006; Thompson, 2009), text messaging was the main communication mode used by FDWs to maintain their connection with their families overseas and local communities. This research further compares the occasions on which FDWs chose SMS over mobile voice calls and the differences in the topics communicated via the two mobile modes. However, in the quantitative analysis, the FDWs were found to use voice calls as much as text messages when they communicated with family in their home country. Hence, it may be easier to tell how much the FDWs value the importance of communication with any social relation by observing their frequency of using costly mobile voice calls.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

With respect to FDWs' mobile phone use, this study suggests that the purposes of maintaining connection and resisting control are not oppositional or antithetical; rather, the former is an articulation of the latter. More specifically, the current work advances the thesis that maintaining connection with distant family members and local friends is in fact a form of resisting employers' control. Our data strongly show that the FDWs used mobile phones primarily for personal and relational uses, which allowed them to reach out to families and friends in the homeland and host society. This can be seen as a way to break through the "imprisoned" domestic workplace, with or without employers' permission, to regain their subjectivity, connection and freedom. For the sake of keeping their jobs, the FDWs chose to use this communicative vehicle as a subtle, covert, strategic form of resistance to employers' control.

The results show that using mobile phones significantly changes FDWs' lives when interacting with their employers, families who are overseas and local communities. Both the quantitative and qualitative results show that FDWs use mobile phones more for the purpose of connection, especially in maintaining close ties with their families. It is also an important tool for communicating with local communities, thereby reducing their loneliness and isolation and

also provides information exchange and a supporting network. These echo Julsrud et al.'s study (2009) that mobile communication is meant for maintaining or strengthening ties, such as long distance parenting roles and marital relationships.

The mobile phone is a crucial vehicle for FDWs who are allowed and can afford to own them to overcome the boundaries of the "total institution" of their working conditions and maintain their connection with the outside world. Although FDWs' mobile phone use brings them more freedom for communication and connection, their use is constrained by employers. Most Singaporean employers still regard owning mobile phones as a counterproductive influence on their domestic helpers (Sun, 2006). This study on foreign domestic helpers using mobile phones is indeed representative of a small but increasing percentage of foreign workers. For work purposes, their employers mostly agree to let them use mobile phones as long as their work can be properly done. It is considered a privilege for FDWs to have mobile phones, which signifies the trust of their employers and their own freedom and subjectivity. As such, they must respect the explicit and implicit rules about the appropriate use of mobile phones within the households. It requires the workers to exercise self-control to "earn" their right to keep using the phones.

Moreover, this study found different patterns in FDWs' use of mobile phones for professional and personal use. For most of the cost-conscious FDW respondents who ought to pay their phone bills, the results of their mobile phone usage truly reflects their perceived values toward the three social relations. They varied in using voice calls or SMS messages, time of use, the length of call, the frequency of SMS messages, and payment.

This not only indicates that the FDWs value social connections more than work with respect to using mobile phones, but also show their compliance with the conduct of phone usage set by their employers. They felt less lonely and homesick by using mobile communication to connect to local social networks and families and friends overseas.

Finally, the findings show that price-conscious foreign workers are keen users of prepaid mobile phone cards whether for work or for personal communication. The main factors that affect their selection of mobile services are cost, ease of use and relative advantages. Similar to findings in prior studies (Sun, 2006; Pranata, 2009; Thompson, 2009), the more affordable and less intrusive text messaging is found to be the most popular mobile phone function across the three social relations such that FDWs use them frequently any time, on any occasion and for any topic. In contrast, the findings reveal that FDWs tend to use voice calls longer with their stronger-tied relationships (such as family members overseas), for special occasions, and for emergencies. The FDWs strategically use a combination of voice calls and text messaging for their work and especially personal life. In fact, this study found that FDWs used almost as many voice calls as text messages when they communicated with their families overseas, something that did not surface in

any previous study. It is because the FDWs highly value the maintenance of relationships with their family or friends in their home country and thus did not mind making expensive voice calls. Although text messaging is very popular, when it comes to emotional support and personal needs, voice calls still have an irreplaceable value on the impact of telepresence.

Overall, the availability of mobile phones helps the FDWs improve their isolated working conditions and living status, as well as provides a communication channel to maintain close ties with their families overseas and broaden their local social networks. Technology is neither gender-neutral nor self-guaranteed empowerment (Richardson et al., 2002). Due to lower income and relatively few secure jobs, women are less likely to own high-priced technology items (Hafkin, 2002). However, even though all the FDWs are low-income females, as seeking emotional support and maintaining relationships are their priorities, mobile phones provide them access to their loved ones, social networks, or people in the host society. Using mobile phones provides a communication channel for them to psychologically resist total control, escape from unequal power relationships at work, and create telepresence among friends and family at home while they work in a foreign country.

Gender may also influence the use of mobile phones. In future, using a similar research design to investigate Singapore foreign male construction workers' mobile phone usage toward the three social relations could reveal differences in mobile phone user patterns related to gender.

The use of mobile communication is highly contextualised and culturally sensitive. In Singapore, most domestic helpers are strictly constrained in terms of mobility, opportunities to meet other people, and using land lines or other communication technology. To most FDWs, having mobile phones with or without employers' permission or awareness becomes the ideal, even the only means for connection. Singapore's mobile operators' packages offer cheap text messaging compared to voice calls, especially using prepaid mobile phone cards. The above reasons probably explain why FDWs tend to rely on mobile phones—especially the use of SMS—for communication purposes. In addition, the culture of Filipino maids, who form the majority of the respondents, is typically buoyant, oral and sociable. They have been able to form a strong support network in their host country. Their English language ability also helps them to fit in easily in Singapore and earn higher salaries (compared to FDWs from other countries) to afford the use of mobile phones. They are considered less isolated than maids from other countries and more innovative. In future research, it will be worth investigating how this cultural context affects the use of mobile phones in specific groups.

As for limitations, since the data collection of this exploratory study did not use a representative sampling method, the results may not be applied to a broader population of FDWs in other national contexts. However, this exploratory study contributes to the emerging literature regarding the impact of mobile communication on specific social groups interacting with different

social relations. It enhances the understanding of the relationships between mobile phone use, social control and social networking. It also investigates mobile phone use patterns and motivations among migrant domestic workers in Singapore.

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### NOTES

1. Pepper spray is a chemical spray sold in small aerosol cans. It is marketed to be carried discreetly and used as a weapon of self-defence. When sprayed in the eyes of an assailant it will cause the eyes to burn, tear up, and temporary blindness. The overall experience is painful, although not life threatening. It is meant to be used as a deterrent so that the victim can extricate themselves from the dangerous situation.
2. It should be noted that subject #110 is quoted in the next section of this paper that she views her mobile phone as having the potential to save her life.
3. The first number in the parenthesis is the subject number, the second number is the participant’s age, and the third number is their stated ethnicity.
4. Quoted previously in the section about vulnerability to men.

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