

# Connect vs. Control: Mobile Phone Usage of Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore

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# Introduction



- 1 in 6 S'pore families employ FDWs  
17,000 FDWs (Wong, 2008)
- 'total institution'
- Affordable mobile phone → FDWs become potential users
- Previous studies:
  - Control (Sun, 2006) versus connection (Thompson, 2009)
  - Achieve temporal and spatial simultaneity (Paragas, 2009)



# FDWs in Singapore

- Asia: home to large low-skilled migrant surplus & receiving nations (multi-faceted issue and an evolving phenomenon)
  - Not simply a market-driven economic transaction but socio-cultural relations between individuals, households, and societies (Yeoh, Huang, & Gonzalez, 1999)
- FDWs in Singapore:
  - 5,000 in 1978
  - 180,000 in 2008
- Mixed blessing for the host society & cause problems for their own families (Huang & Yeoh, 2003)

# Telco market in Singapore

- S'pore is a saturated market → FDW: consumer “niche” for mobile communication services (Thompson, 2005)
- Price-conscious foreign workers: keen users of pre-paid mobile phone cards
- Telcos' strong competition for FDWs after 2008
- SMSs: most popular (Goh, 2001)
- Budget phones (Tan, 2009)





# FDWs & Mobile Phones

- Higher socioeconomic status (Kecopokan)
  - Mobile phone as high-valued commodity
  - Sharing knowledge, keeping costs low
  - Exploit handphone-mediated social network



# FDWs: Work & Control

- Live-in maids isolated from host society
  - “total institution” - Goffman (1961)
  - “soul-destroying hollowness” – Clark-Lewis (1996)
  - Discouraging support system, leading to vulnerability – Cheng (1996)
- Control & restricted use of mobile phones by employers &
- Mobile phone: overcome control & resistance & subjectivity
- FDWs mobile phone use: a privilege (Thompson, 1995)

# FDWs Mobile Phone Use

- Geographically dispersed, technologically connected (Katz et al, 2004)
- Mobile phone: a tool for interaction
- Previous studies:
  - Shaping community → normalization
  - Process of accelerating integration
- Fostering of connection with home
  - Text messaging: cheaper, less disruptive alternative to voice calls
  - Managing & maintaining relationships at home in almost real-time



# Method

- Quantitative
  - Two surveys: social nature of FDW mobile phone usage: 2007 & 2010
  - Administered with Filipinos FDWs at various locations
  - Sample: 44 (2007), 68 (2010)
- Qualitative
  - Interview data with 68 Filipino FDWs: December 2009 – March 2010
  - Thematic data analysis applied



# Method

- The Filipino FDW:
  - Biggest foreign nationality group
  - Better paid than their counterparts
  - Mobile phone users
  - Extensive network in Singapore

# Survey: Key Measures

- Social Relations
- Mobile Phone Usage
  - Type(s) of services
  - Model
  - Communication type (voice/SMS) with various key groups
  - SMS usage
  - Billing
- Usage reasons
- Perceptions on social relations



# Key Variables

- *Social Relations*: employment relations, family relations (home country), and friendship (local community).
- *Mobile Phone Usage*
  - Mobile phone services used; Typical communication devices; Mobile calling time; Short Message Services; Typical time of day used; Payer of the phone bills
- *Reasons for Using Mobile Phones*
- *Perceptions of Social Relations*

# Summary of quantitative patterns

- Handphone technology is particularly useful for keeping in contact with family in the home countries.
- Usage patterns for employers and local friends are similar, but different for family members.



**Table 1 How do you communicate with your (employers/family/friends)?**

	Employer	Family	Friends
Mostly voice call (handphone)	8 11.80%	20 29.40%	8 11.80%
Mostly send/receive SMSs	27 39.70%	21 30.90%	35 51.50%
Mostly home phone	12 17.60%	1 1.50%	0 0.00%
Mostly public phone	0 0.00%	1 1.50%	1 1.50%
Multiple Answers	21 30.88%	25 36.80%	24 35.30%
Total	68 100%	68 100%	68 100%

**Table 2: How long is your total mobile calling time (initiated and received) on average per day with your (employers/family/friends)**

	Employer	Family	Friends
0-5 minutes	31 45.60%	5 7.40%	12 17.60%
5-15 minutes	18 26.50%	34 50%	30 44.10%
15-30 minutes	14 20.60%	21 30.90%	16 23.50%
30-60 minutes	1 1.50%	6 8.80%	2 2.90%
More than 60 minutes	3 4.40%	1 1.50%	7 10.30%
No Answer	1 1.50%	1 1.50%	1 1.50%
Total	68 100%	68 100%	68 100%



**Table 3: What time of the day do you usually use your mobile phone for communicating with your (employer/family/friends)**

	Employer	Family	Friends
Morning	7 10.30%	2 2.90%	0 0.00%
Afternoon	18 26.50%	10 14.70%	7 10.30%
Evening	22 32.40%	43 63.20%	52 76.50%
Multiple Choices	21 30.90%	13 19.12%	9 13.20%
Total	68 100%	68 100%	68 100%

# Findings – Mobile Usage

- Keeping contact with home
  - More likely to call home (29.4%) than local friends (11.8%) or employer (11.8%)
- Less likely to talk for long with employers
  - 45.6% spend 0-5 minutes on phone with employers
  - Longer talk times with friends and family
- Calling employers in the mornings; calling friends and family in the afternoons & evenings

**Table 4: Who pays the phone bills for (work/communicating with family/communicating with friends)?**

	Work	Family	Friends
Myself	55 80.90%	63 92.6	64 94.10%
My employer	9 13.20%	0 0%	1 1.50%
My parents or relatives	0 0%	3 4.40%	1 1.50%
Other	1 1.50%	1 1.50%	0 0%
No answer	3 4.40%	1 1.50%	2 2.90%
Total	68 100%	68 100%	68 100%



# Findings – Mobile Usage

- Who pays the bill?
  - Calling family & friends – FDWs themselves
  - Calling employer – Employers pay
- Connection versus control
  - Overall benefits of connection
  - Similar kinds of services used across all relations: pre-paid mobile phone cards & SMSs

**Table 5 What are the most important reasons for you to use mobile phone for personal life?**

Maintain relationship with family and friend in home country	38
	55.90%
Exchange useful information	3
	4.40%
Reduce the loneliness and isolation	3
	4.40%
Maintain relationship with family and friend in home country plus any other choice	22
	32.40%
No answer	2
	2.90%
Total	68
	100%

# Findings – Relations

- Majority (92.6%) disagreed having good relationship with employer
- 69.9% thought employers controlled their lives
- 85.3% felt they no longer maintain close relationships with family/friends at home
- 30.9% do not feel lonely working in Singapore
- 60.3% do not have local social networks nor close friends



# Findings –2007 vs. 2010 surveys

- Similarities

- Usage purpose: for maintenance of personal relations (68.2% in 2007; 62.5% in 2010)
- Using mobile phone equally for work and personal reasons (22.7% in 2007; 26.5% in 2010)
- Using mobile more for work than personal reasons (9.1% in 2007; 7.9% in 2010)
- Call lengths for work (45.5% under 5 min in 2007; 46.3% in 2010)

# Findings –2007 vs. 2010 Surveys

- Changes: slightly more positive in 2010
  - it is advisable to use mobile phone for work (average score of 3.16 in 2007; 3.85 in 2010)
  - mobile phone helps in task accomplishment (3.17 in 2007; 3.72 in 2010)
  - mobile phone as a status symbol (2.95 in 2007; 3.57 in 2010)
  - using mobile phone gives others a good impression (2.86 in 2007; 3.26 in 2010)
- Having a mobile phone is helpful to self and provides immediate access

## 2007 vs. 2010 surveys

- Usage of handphone serves more purposes in
  - Maintaining personal connections than for work
  - More for connection than for control



# Findings – Interview Data

- Four segments
  - Changes of life with 3 social relations after acquisition of mobile phones
  - Usage time of mobile phones with the 3 social relations
  - Reasons of selection of mobile phone services
  - Occasions and subjects of using mobile voice vs. SMS

# Findings – Changes of Life after Usage

- Communication with employers
  - Easier & more convenient for work
  - Calls relating to housework, children or meals
  - Employers allow FDWs to carry mobile phone → giving them the benefit of personal communication with home country and/or friends
- Communication with family & friends
  - Range of affective responses, unlike communication with employers
  - (83.8%)Ease of connecting with family & friends,
  - Using the mobile phone to connect with family easily (38.2%), which ease their worries (41.1%) and reduce the feeling of homesickness (23.5%)



# Findings – Changes of Life after Usage

- Communication with local friends(affective)
  - primary way to relieve loneliness and homesick (44.1%)
  - happier after communicating with friends (32.3%).  
Besides, the respondents expressed using cell phones to share life and problems (7), make friends (7), distress (2) and kill time (1)
  - Subjects: work, family, love life, gossips, greetings, and coordinating chores or meetings



# Findings – When to Use

- With employers: anytime

*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)*

- With family & friends: free time
  - When all work is done (83%)
  - mostly in the evenings (26%)
  - Calls & messaging is cheaper (26%)

# Findings – What to Use



- Most popular telcos:
  - Cheap (50.4%)
  - Ease of use (30.8%)
  - Attractive deals (16.2%)

# Findings - Occasions & Subjects

- Voice calls –
  - Communication & emotional cues & satisfaction
  - More costly
  - Used for:
    - Emergencies (55.9%)
    - Expressing love & concern (30.9%)



# Findings - Occasions & Subjects

- SMS
  - Daily (or almost daily) interaction
  - Used because they are cheaper
  - General greetings
  - Wide range of topics

# Discussion

- Both the quantitative and qualitative results show that the FDWs use mobile phone more for the purpose of connection
- Crucial tool against 'total institution'
  - More freedom
  - Most employers find mobile phones counterproductive
  - Mobile phones remain a privilege, not a right
  - Explicit & implicit rules
  - Self control

# Discussion

- Different usage patterns for work & personal use (using voice calls or SMSs, time in use, the length of call, the frequency of SMSs, and payment)
  - FDWs value social interaction more than work
  - BUT they respect employers' rules on usage
  - Keen users of pre-paid services (cost, ease of use & relative advantages)
  - More voice calls with closer relations
  - Strategically use the combination of voice calls and text messaging for work and especially personal life.



# Discussion

- Overall, mobile phone usage helps FDWs improve isolated work-life
  - Channel of communication
  - Improve work
  - Maintain close-tie at distant home
  - Broaden social networks

# Welcome Feedback!

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