

Migrant workers' use of ICTs for interpersonal communication –  
The experience of female domestic workers in Singapore

**Minu Thomas and Sun Sun Lim**

Communications and New Media Programme  
National University of Singapore

**Abstract**

This paper explores ICT use by Indian and Filipino female migrant workers who are employed as live-in maids in Singapore through ethnographic interviews with twenty women. Their particular employment circumstances translate into a circumscribed and isolated living and working experience which makes their access and use of ICTs even more significant. Our findings show that these women employ a variety of technologies for everyday communication, including letters, the mobile phone and the Internet, with the mobile phone being the most crucial communication device for most of them. Mobile communications enable them to foster emotional links with their friends and family, grow their social networks and afford them greater autonomy in seeking better job opportunities and the management of their personal matters. The paper concludes by making three policy recommendations aimed at improving ICT access for migrant workers. First, upon arrival in their host countries, all migrant workers should be educated about the access, use and cost of different communication devices and services available to them. Second, contracts between employers and migrant workers should have clear provisions for the employees' rights to communication and specifically, mobile communications. Third, governments, non-governmental organisations and the private sector should actively seek to narrow the technological divide between migrant workers' home and host countries so that these workers' communications with individuals and organisations in their home countries are not impeded.

**Keywords**

ICTs, mobile phone, communications, migrant workers, empowerment, development, social capital

**Introduction**

As Singaporean women enter the workforce in larger numbers, thus contributing to a rising proportion of dual-career families, demand has grown for live-in maids who can ease working women's household burdens (Yeoh, Huang & Rahman, 2005). According to recent estimates, at least 150,000 female migrant workers from countries such as Indonesia, Philippines and India are employed as live-in maids in Singapore (Rahman, Yeo & Huang, 2005), constituting over one-fifth of Singapore's migrant workforce. These maids perform household chores such as cooking, cleaning, grocery

shopping, child-minding and caring for elderly family members. Unlike migrant women who work in factories or offices and have their own accommodation, maids have relatively little autonomy as they live with their employers. Hence, their access to basic necessities such as food, shelter, communication, medical treatment and the right to private space and time are determined by their employers. Previous research has found that within the employers' homes, maids are treated neither as family members nor as total outsiders (Rahman et al, 2005). In some homes, employers use security cameras and other ICT tools to conduct surveillance on their maids (Au Yong, 2005) and seek to prevent their maids from developing strong ties with their families back home (Yeoh et al, 2005). Outside their homes, employers restrict their maids' movements because they are held liable if their maids go missing or become pregnant (Ministry of Manpower, 2009). Hence, employers limit, as far as they can, their maids' social activities and forays into public space as they fear that their maids may foster romantic or sexual relationships or even engage in prostitution. Employers have been known to withhold their maids' passports, impose curfews and limit their access to communications (Sun, 2006). Apart from fetching their young charges to or from school, running errands or accompanying their employers' families on their outings, most maids spend the bulk of their work days in their employers' homes. Thus, they have few opportunities for an active social life and tend to lead isolated existences in their employers' homes and experience loneliness and depression (Rahman et al, 2005). Given such constrained living and working conditions, these maids' communication with the outside world assumes great importance. Their sense of well-being hinges on their ability to reach beyond the confines of their domiciles to engage in social interaction, seek companionship, solicit help and maintain ties with their loved ones back home. In this regard, information and communication technologies (ICTs) may offer these maids a crucial lifeline as devices such as mobile phones and the Internet enable long-distance communication with their friends and kin.

Singapore is a highly networked society where ICT use is intensive, whether in governance, business, education, public service or interpersonal communication. As of April 2008, household broadband penetration was 82.5 per cent and mobile phone subscriptions had risen to over 5.9 million, exceeding the national population of 4.6 million (Infocomm Development Authority [IDA], Jan-Jun 2008). Yet such ICT access may not be readily forthcoming for low-waged migrant workers such as maids, who may lack the autonomy, resources or skills to avail of ICTs in their personal communications. If they can and do use ICTs, which do they use most avidly, what benefits do they derive from its use and what challenges do they encounter? To answer these questions, our study sought to understand whether and how maids in Singapore use ICTs in their daily lives and the impact of such use.

## **Literature Review**

A growing body of extant research has been conducted on migrant workers' ICT use and its implications for connectivity and empowerment. Vertovec (2004) argues that cheap international phone calls, despite their prosaic nature, serve as a crucial social adhesive which binds communities around the globe, especially non-elite transnational

migrants. Indeed, for many migrant workers, phone calls are indispensable for providing social support to and staying in touch with family members who are working overseas (Strom, 2002). Beyond phone calls, migrant workers have varying levels of access to mediated communications including ethnic or local mass media which serve immigrant communities, transnational mass media such as mobile phones which facilitate mediated interactions across transnational time–space contexts and global media such as the Internet which enable quasi-mediated interactions for global audiences (Benitez, 2006). Studies of migrant workers in different parts of the world indicate that they employ a wide range of ICT devices and services in their communications, whether local or transnational, with different ICTs dominant for particular regions or communities. For example, El Salvadoran migrants in the US use mobile phones, prepaid cards, videoconferencing and home videos to keep in touch with their significant others (Benitez, 2006). In Jamaica, transnational families rely on the mobile phone to keep in touch with overseas friends and kin (Horst, 2006; Horst & Miller, 2006.) In South China, working class migrants depend upon online chats at cybercafés, payphones, Little Smart (a geographically confined but inexpensive wireless service for communication within cities) or prepaid mobile services (Chu & Yang, 2006; Lam & Peng, 2006; Qiu, 2007, 2008a, 2008b). This ability to avail of different communication services can be gratifying and empowering for migrant workers. Chinese migrants find the mobile phone indispensable for job opportunities, maintaining contact with kith and kin, expanding their social networks and engaging in courtship (Lam & Peng, 2006; Strom 2002; Qiu, 2007, 2008a, 2008b). Amongst Jamaican migrants, the mobile phone has become particularly expedient for arranging for remittances and obtaining money during emergencies (Horst, 2006).

Conversely though, ICT use can also be burdensome for migrant workers. The technological divide between the home and host countries of migrant workers mean that communication is not always seamless and problem-free (Benitez, 2006). At the same time, the skills required to use different communication devices within divergent technological systems across geographical boundaries, to cope with the breakdown of devices and faculty services and to select the most economical pricing plan for one’s communication needs can be especially challenging for transnational migrants from developing countries (Panagakos and Horst, 2006). For example, Qiu (2008) observed that the design of inexpensive mobile phone handsets targeted at Chinese working class migrants omitted basic functions which consequently made them difficult to use. He also found that while young migrant workers in South China enjoyed a high level of ICT connectivity, they were also the most likely to lose control over their ICT budgets. Similarly, Law and Peng (2006) noted that Chinese migrant workers in Guangdong were so accustomed to the perpetual contact which the mobile phone enables that they spent a disproportionately large part of their salaries on mobile phone services, and even more on social activities arising from mobile communications.

A subset of the research on migrant workers’ ICT use has focused on transnational families, of which some delve specifically into the experiences of transnational mothers. In a study of migrants and refugees in seven countries, it was found that different communication modes had different implications for how

transnational family relationships were sustained (Wilding, 2006). Email helped to improve the quality and quantity of communication while cheap and instantaneous communication via phone, fax and email enabled them to participate in their family members' lives. The study also found that while ICTs help to mediate a sense of togetherness, it paradoxically intensified the feeling of distance because the intimacy of long-distance contact made the lack of face-to-face contact even more palpable. As for migrant mothers in particular, Uy-Tioco (2007) found that the mobile phone enabled female Filipino migrant workers in the US to remotely assert their roles as mothers. They reinforced their love for their children through text messaging and maintained their presence at home despite the geographical distance. In the same vein, Parrenas (2005) observed that in contrast to migrant fathers who were inclined to maintain only instrumental communication with their families, migrant mothers sought to foster intimate ties with their children through regular communication via phone calls, text messages or letters. Besides the fostering of emotional bonds, transnational families have been found to use ICTs for instrumental communication including arranging for or advising on remittances and providing guidance on their children's homework (see for example Horst and Miller, 2006; Parrenas, 2005 and Pertierra, 2006).

In light of the groundwork laid by extant research on migrant workers' ICT use, our study sought to address the following research questions:

1. *How do maids in Singapore use ICTs in their everyday lives?*
2. *What consequences does ICT use have on their living and working conditions?*
3. *What difficulties, if any, do they encounter in their access to and use of ICTs?*

## **Methodology**

For this exploratory study, we conducted ethnographic interviews in 2008 with twenty maids working in Singapore - ten each from India and the Philippines. The interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling which is useful for recruiting subjects who are otherwise difficult to locate, such as homeless individuals, migrant workers or undocumented immigrants (Babbie, 2004). The Filipino interviewees were recruited at Lucky Plaza on Orchard Road where Filipino migrant workers, including maids, congregate on Sundays. The interviews with these Filipino respondents were also conducted at these informal gathering spots. The Indian respondents were recruited through the researchers' personal contacts, including employers of maids. Hence, the Indian respondents were either interviewed at their employers' homes or at food courts nearby. Given the circumstances, the Indian respondents may have been less forthcoming during the interviews. Be that as it may, all interviewees were given firm assurances about the confidentiality and anonymity of their views to put them at ease. As the interviewees were uncomfortable about the interviews being audio-recorded, verbatim notes were taken and transcripts were prepared within 24 hours of the interviews being conducted.

For background information, we asked the interviewees about their families, their cities of origin, their age and educational qualifications. We asked them to describe, on a day-to-day basis, which ICTs they used, for what purposes, and whether

they derived any gratifications or encountered difficulties from such use. We also enquired as to whom they communicated with on a regular basis, what they communicated about and which communication modes they used, e.g. letter, mobile, landline, computer etc. A profile of the interviewees and the ICTs they used is at Table 1, with pseudonyms being used in place of real names.

### **Findings and discussion**

While the maids employed a variety of technologies for their communication, including the mobile phone, landline, computer and the Internet, as well as letters and greeting cards, the mobile phone was clearly the most crucial communication device for most of them. 7 of the 10 Indian maids and 9 of the 10 Filipino maids we interviewed owned mobile phones. When they had first started working in Singapore, most of them did not own personal mobile phones but gradually saved up for them. Two of them had been given mobile phones by their employers so that the latter could contact them with instructions or occasionally conduct remote surveillance if the maids left the house on errands or during days-off. For these two women, their employers imposed conditions on when and how the phones were to be used, such as restricting the frequency and duration of calls and text messaging, or imposing a prohibition on international calls which were more expensive. In which case, the maids resorted to calling cards to make these international calls.

### ***Ritual and Escape***

A typical day in a maid's life begins with household chores such as making breakfast and lunch for her employers, sending the children to school and performing households chores such as cleaning and doing the laundry. By noon they may have some time for themselves, when they can send text messages or call their families and friends. After lunch, their routine resumes with making tea and dinner followed by cleaning, and their day only ends after their employers have gone to bed. As they tend to be exhausted by the end of the day, sleep rather than recreation is their main priority at night-time.

Ling (2008) opines that the mobile phone is widely used for the performance of ritual activities. In the case of maids, their daily routines are highly repetitive and our interviewees eased their drudgery through some private rituals enabled by their mobile phones. Specifically, interviewees who owned personal mobile phones would steal idle moments in their day to send a text message or to call their loved ones, with some maids doing so on a daily basis. The ability to perform these personal rituals of communicating with their family and friends offered these women a much-needed reprieve from the monotony and tedium of their jobs. Compared to other diversions such as watching television or listening to music, mobile phone use was the most convenient and gratifying because it could be used discreetly, and it enabled a precious link to family and friends:

*'I use my mobile phone mainly for text messaging. I send around 60 messages a day both to family and friends all over the world. I call my parents and sister twice a week and speak to them for half an hour.'* (Pearl, 27, Filipino)

*'I would like to thank the inventor of the mobile phone. I find the mobile most useful when I fight with my husband and have to make up with him. I fight with him almost every morning and then I call him from the mobile at least ten times to make up with him.'* (Sumathi, 32, Indian)

It was through these ritual communications that the women in our study could maintain close relationships with family members and friends. Hence, even though their primary role within their employer's home was to serve as the housekeeper, they were able to maintain their personal lives and relationships, and to perform their roles as wives, mothers, daughters, sisters and friends.

Morley (2000) argued that 'communication technologies can function as disembedding mechanisms, powerfully enabling individuals (and sometimes whole families or communities) to escape, at least imaginatively, from their geographical locations' (pp.149-150). While it has been argued that the mobile phone enables people to maintain an absent presence (Gergen, 2002), for the women we studied, the mobile phone was crucial for facilitating a sense of absence from their physical present. Were it not for these personal phone calls or text messages, their communication would mainly be with their employers since they were mostly house-bound. With the mobile phone, they could 'escape' and maintain an existence, however fleeting and intangible, which extended beyond their lives as maids. In so doing, they were not merely defined by their employment but could regard themselves as individuals with personal goals which transcended the physical confines of their employers' homes. A particularly poignant case was that of 21-year-old Aiysha from India.: *'[The mobile phone] gives me a sense of control over my own life and I can at least talk to my family back home in India'*. Her estranged husband had forcibly taken their two children away from her and her communication with her family was crucial in helping her to recover from her personal trials. At the time of the interview, she had just moved into a new employer's home and a sympathetic acquaintance had bought her a mobile phone. When she had first migrated to Singapore to work as a maid, her employer had not allowed her to access any mode of communication: *'I felt cut off from the outside world during those days,'* said Aiysha, who was heartened by her new-found ability to connect with the outside world.

### ***Sociality and Companionship***

Katz opined that "[b]y allowing people to transcend a variety of physical and social barriers, the telephone has led to a complex set of dispersed personal and commercial relationships" (p. 116). This was indeed the case for our interviewees and their mobile phone use. Apart from their communication with family and friends back home, the women we studied also sought to grow their social networks beyond and *in spite of* their physical, social and temporal constraints, primarily through their mobile phones. The Filipino workers enjoyed more days-off compared to the Indian workers - another factor that aided their more frequent socializing. Six of the ten Filipino workers interviewed were getting a weekly day-off, two a fortnightly day-off and the remaining

two a monthly day-off. As for the Indian workers, three were getting a weekly day-off, six a monthly day-off, while one was not getting any days-off. The mobile phone played an important role in helping them to coordinate their appointments and other social activities with their friends, mostly through text messaging. Throughout the rest of the week, although they did not get the time to talk or text message on a regular basis, they would keep in intermittent contact with their 'local' friends. In this way, the companionship they shared on their days-off could be extended, through mobile phone communication, to other days of the week as well:

*'When I have to meet up with friends, and I cannot find them at the designated spot, then the mobile phone comes in handy. It also serves as an extension for communication with my friends in Singapore after my weekly day-off.'*  
(Dale, 45, Filipino)

It was also through the use of ICTs that some workers could take control of their personal lives in terms of initiating romantic relationships and seeking spouses. Despite being women of marriageable age, these women's opportunities to meet eligible life partners were few and far between given the nature of their work. Through ICT-mediated communication however, two of our interviewees were attempting to find life partners. Tessy, a 39-year-old Indian worker had been abandoned by her husband and moved to Singapore to support her children who were back home in India. In due course, she managed to find a life companion by using the Internet and the mobile phone. Her employer had posted her profile on Shaadi.com, an Indian matrimonial website, through which she found a suitable match. In the early days of their courtship, she would use the Internet and webcam at her employer's home to get to know him better. After this initial correspondence, she and her fiancée moved on to text messages and voice calls through the mobile phone to develop their relationship. Mercy, 36, another Indian worker, had had a similar experience. Clearly, for these two women, ICTs such as the Internet and mobile phone 'brought the outside world in' and made it possible for them to engage in mediated sociality and to extend their social networks despite being circumscribed by the nature of their employment. These women were therefore able to initiate and maintain relationships in an upfront manner, rather than resorting to furtive dalliances which foreign domestic workers have been documented to conduct on their days-off (Yeoh & Huang, 1998). However, it was also with the support of their employers that these two women were able to engage in online dating. Without which, the two women would have been unlikely to have found the time or to have possessed the requisite ICT skills to avail of online dating services.

### ***Contacts and Capital***

Beyond emotional needs, the women also had practical and instrumental needs which could be served in part by ICTs, but principally the mobile phone. Horst and Miller (2006) assert that the mobile phone, "far from being peripheral or an additional expense, is actually the new heart of economic survival" (p. 108) because it enables access to one's extended support network in times of need. Indeed, the women we studied had varied needs for which they tapped into their family and friends both at

home and in Singapore, as well as their employment agencies and former employers. Our interviewees used their mobile phones to obtain information about, amongst others, remittance methods, discounted airline tickets and job opportunities, thus managing their personal affairs with greater autonomy and efficiency:

*'I have been in Singapore for 15 years. I do not write letters or use the landline. For many long years, I have been relying on the mobile phone. My previous jobs were secured through my network of friends connected through the mobile phone.'* (Vera, 34, Filipino)

*'My employer gave me some contact numbers of bank managers in India and with this information, I could talk directly to these managers and find out the best ways to invest my money in something like a mutual fund. It is better than just keeping my money locked up in the cupboard or sending it to my relatives in India.'* (Mallika, 27, Indian)

The network of contacts that could be grown and activated through the mobile phone translated into social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) for these women which in many circumstances, further translated into enhanced capital for their families back home. In transnational movements, "people's social locations affect their access to resources and mobility across transnational spaces, but also their agency as initiators, refiners and transformers of these locations" (Pessar and Mahler, 2003, p. 817). The shifts in the communication modes of our respondents as their overseas stints progressed reflect their improved access to communication resources and their ability to provide enhanced access to communications for their families back home. Thenmozhi's experience illustrates this point. She had first migrated to Singapore in 1996, when there were few public telephones in her village and the cost of international calls was prohibitively high. In the initial months of her stay in Singapore, she used to call her children once every 15 days from public telephones using calling cards. Since her home in India did not have a landline, her children received her calls through a public telephone near their home. At the time of the interview however, Thenmozhi could call her children from her mobile phone daily because she had also bought a mobile phone and a landline for her family to receive her calls. Thenmozhi's income as a domestic worker and her exposure to ICT use in Singapore had given her the technological and financial wherewithal to improve communication between herself and her family:

*"I speak to my three children daily for at least five minutes each time. I even keep track of their daily schedules and the mundane occurrences in their everyday lives. I myself received only ten years of education but I want my children to be better educated than me. So, I call them whenever they have exams or any other important event in their lives to encourage them."* (Thenmozhi, 33, Indian)

This created a virtuous cycle because quite apart from facilitating more frequent contact between mother and children, Thenmozhi was better able to manage her family remotely, thus enabling her to continue with her overseas employment. This in turn put

her in an advantageous financial position, bringing the family closer to its goal of attaining higher education for the children.

### ***Burdens and Challenges***

While ICTs could serve as instruments of empowerment and connectivity for the women we studied, they were not without burdens and challenges. With greater connectivity, the workers were bound by responsibilities to their family members, especially to children whom they had left behind, and this took a considerable emotional toll on these women. Very often, these women were the first point of contact during a family emergency as they could be relied upon to provide monetary support. Hence the enhanced connectivity, while a boon, also added an emotional burden for these women because they felt obliged to look after their loved ones remotely as they continued to play the roles of mother, wife, daughter and sister.

Another downside to the enhanced connectivity was the challenge of coping with the financial costs involved. The average monthly income of the Indian workers interviewed for this study was S\$321, and the average monthly income of the Filipino workers interviewed was S\$470. As a proportion of their monthly incomes, communication expenses were 12.1 per cent for Indian workers and 10.4 per cent for Filipino workers (see Table 2). These women's restraint and financial prudence was therefore constantly tested as they monitored their communication expenses:

*'The mobile phone can be addictive like smoking, especially when I am idle. The result is that I end up spending more money than I expect to.'* (Violet, 46, Filipino)

*'I use the mobile phone as well as the landline at my employer's home. My mobile bill itself works out to S\$50 and added to that I use two calling cards a month to speak to my family thrice a month.'* (Teena, 37, Indian)

### **Policy implications**

This study has sought to contribute to a better understanding of the benefits and costs of ICT use amongst transnational migrant workers. To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the few studies ever conducted on the use of ICTs by live-in maids who have particular living and working conditions as compared to migrant workers who work in factories and offices. Serving as maids in their employers' homes, the lives of these migrant women revolve around those of their employers. Their employers' lifestyles, routines, practices and need dominate and take precedence. Without much autonomy, free time or personal space, it is challenging for these women to maintain or even possess a sense of self-worth and personal identity. The particular circumstances of such employment, which translates into a highly circumscribed and isolated living and working experience for these women, makes the access and use of communication technologies even more crucial. Our findings strongly suggest that ICTs, especially the mobile phone, are indispensable for these women and their sense of well-being. With

their mobile phones, the women we interviewed could keep in perpetual and intermittent contact with their family and friends, seek companionship and grow their social networks, thus helping to enhance their social and economic capital.

In most developing and even developed countries, women face several disadvantages owing to social, economic and cultural factors. Amartya Sen, who described development as a 'process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy' (1999, p. 3), pointed to the existence of severe female disadvantage in health and other aspects of well-being in many areas of the third world. The greater deprivation of females, Sen noted, is linked to relatively low levels of female literacy and absence of social and economic empowerment. In the age of the network society, gender-based inequalities have also come to be characterized by the lack of access to information and knowledge networks. Therefore, ICTs can play a useful role in building information networks and empowering women who are otherwise disadvantaged (Nath, 2001).

Given the irreversible trend of globalisation and the growing movement of labour across developed and developing parts of the world (Brown, 2006), it is imperative that we consider the communication needs of transnational workers who leave behind their families in search of better economic opportunities overseas. As more families are 'broken up' in this globalised economy, the demand for maintaining ties across the miles will only increase. Mobile communication in particular, has become so commonplace and integral to the everyday lives of people from all social strata that social policy pertaining to migrant workers needs to take into account such realities. Telephone companies have responded to the particular needs of low-waged migrant workers through mobile phone subscriptions or services that are inexpensive and easy to maintain [see for example, Koh (2009)]. With such options available, migrant workers find mobile communication less prohibitive and are better able to keep in touch with their loved ones and manage their affairs back home.

Social policy needs to keep pace with market innovation. Our findings suggest a few areas for policy intervention. First, while many of the maids we interviewed enjoy enhanced communication as a result of their ICT use, not all of them have the requisite skills or resources to do so. Therefore the training of new maids should, besides equipping them with housekeeping and child-minding skills, also educate them about the access, use and cost of different communication devices and services. Indeed, all migrant workers should be given such training upon their arrival in their host countries, regardless of which industries they join. Second, although the recommended standard contract between employers and maids in Singapore includes a clause stating that "External communications shall be made available" (Association of Employment Agencies Singapore, 2009, ¶ 16), it should be more specifically worded. 'External communications' can refer to asynchronous or less efficient communication methods such as letters. There is also no clear stipulation on the frequency with which such external communications are to be facilitated. Instead, contracts between employers and migrant workers in general should have clear provisions for the employees' rights to communication and specifically, mobile communications. Third, migrant workers enjoy a higher level of technological standards in their host country than in their home country, thus leading to a transnational technological divide which impedes

communication between transnational workers and their loved ones (Benitez, 2006). Governments, non-governmental organisations and the private sector should actively seek to narrow this divide through transnational policies which encourage *inter alia*, the provision of easily accessible and affordably-priced synchronous communication services for migrant workers.

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## Tables

Table 1: Interviewee profile

Name	Age	Educational status	Years overseas	Technologies used
Indian interviewees				
Jameela	21	Secondary (7 <sup>th</sup> Standard)	1.25	Mobile phone (voice calls only)
Malar	45	Primary (2 <sup>nd</sup> Standard)	15	Landline
Mallika	27	Primary (3 <sup>rd</sup> Standard)	6	Mobile phone (voice calls only) and landline
Mercy	36	Higher Secondary	0.25	Landline
Mita	23	Bachelors Degree	0.5	Mobile phone (voice calls and texting) and letter
Parvati	47	Primary (5 <sup>th</sup> Standard)	15	Landline
Sumathi	32	Secondary (7 <sup>th</sup> Standard)	18	Mobile phone (voice calls and texting)
Teena	37	Higher Secondary	2.25	Mobile phone (voice calls and texting) and landline
Tessy	39	High School	10	Mobile phone (voice calls and texting) and computer
Thenmozhi	33	High School	12	Mobile phone (voice calls and texting) and landline
Filipino interviewees				
Abigail	39	High School	11	Mobile phone (voice calls and texting), music player
Candy	22	Bachelors Degree	0.25	Landline and letters
Dale	45	High School	10	Mobile phone (voice calls and texting), music player
Florence	29	Bachelors Degree	2	Mobile phone(voice calls and texting), letters and cards, and computer
Ida	28	Bachelors Degree	8	Mobile phone (voice calls and texting) and landline
Mara	27	High School	2	Mobile phone (voice calls and texting) and letters
Pearl	27	High School	5	Mobile phone(voice calls and texting), letters and computer
Thea	24	Bachelors Degree	1.5	Mobile phone (voice calls and texting), landline, letters and computer
Vera	34	Computer Secretarial Course	15	Mobile phone (voice calls and texting) and landline
Violet	46	High School	19	Mobile phone (voice calls and texting) and computer

Notes: High School indicates 10 years of schooling and higher secondary indicates 12 years of schooling.

Table1: Average Monthly Income and Monthly Expenses on Communication

Income and expenses	Indians	Filipinos
Average monthly income, in Singapore dollars	321	470
Average monthly communication expenses, in Singapore dollars	38.9	49.06
Communication expenses as % of monthly income (average)	12.1	10.4

### Author Biographies

Minu Thomas completed her MA at the Communications and New Media Programme, National University of Singapore. She is currently working in India as an education services professional.

Sun Sun LIM (PhD, LSE) is Assistant Professor at the Communications and New Media Programme, National University of Singapore. She studies technology domestication and charts media ethnographies in Asia, having conducted research in China, Japan, South Korea and Singapore. She has articles published and forthcoming in the *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, *New Media & Society*, *Communications of the ACM*, *Telematics & Informatics*, *Journal of Electronic Commerce Research*, *Asian Journal of Communication*, *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* and *Science, Technology and Society*. She also sits on Singapore's Internet and Media Advisory Committee and the National Youth Council.