World-Making: Mobile Phone Discourses among Selected Urban Poor Married Couples[1]

Lourdes M. Portus

This paper focuses on the role communication technology plays in the world-making of urban poor married couples. It explores if and how mobile phone use has triggered changes in the values, interpersonal networks, and relationships of urban poor married couples.

The findings show that the urban poor, despite their precarious economic condition, keep up with richer counterparts in their acquisition and use of mobile phones. Husbands and wives have differential uses and interpretations of the technology, revealing gender issues and power relationships. Mobile phone use seems to intensify gender biases, which put the husband's concerns as the focal point in household matters, and the wife's own particular concerns at the periphery.

Introduction

The Philippines has earned the dubious reputation of being the texting[2] capital of the world due to the Filipinos' extensive use of the mobile phone[3] (Pertierra et al. in Clayton 2003). Also, the Filipinos' penchant for acquiring a mobile phone unit has spurred interest among scholars and researchers to study the mobile phone and how it is affecting the lives of Filipinos. However, there is a dearth of studies about how the urban poor use the mass media and the new technologies that are in vogue (Portus et al. 2000). Numbering about four million in Metro Manila alone (Simbulan 1998), the urban poor sector is a potential market to reckon with.

Focusing on this research gap, this paper examines mobile phone use among the urban poor, giving particular attention to its usage among married couples. Reflective of the culture and worlds that emerge out of the mobile phone, this paper implicates gender issues and power relationships among urban poor married couples as these surface from their discourses on using the mobile phone. The paper also examines the discourses to draw out particular characteristics of the age group to which these couples belong (20s to 50s), such as their dexterity in operating the gadget as well as the type of messages that they exchange.

From a broader perspective, this paper inquires into how communication technologies affect users in various ways – whether they induce improvements in the individuals, shape and reshape social relations, and trigger changes in broad

cultural conditions. Applying this line of inquiry into the immediate context of this study, i.e., married couples, it is interesting to find out how the mobile phone has (re)constructed the couple's world-making (WM) leading towards their transformation and development into better or worse husbands and wives. As used in this paper, WM means meaning-making or constructing meaning or making sense of the married couples' experiences with the mobile phone. It also means interpreting the ownership and use of the mobile phone as it contributes to self- perception and perception of others, to values being upheld, and to social relationships or interaction with others.

The line of inquiry that this paper pursues runs parallel to the arguments proffered by many communication scholars regarding the impact of communication technologies on people. For instance, Silverblatt, Ferry & Finan (2001) argue that users of communication technologies create various worlds that are defined by their experiences regarding the use of said technologies. These include: a world of gratification, a world of romanticism or realism, a world of material acquisition, and a world of style or form rather than substance.

Meanwhile, Jayaweera (1987) declares that technologies bring transformation in the minds. Communication technology does this by generating a whole cluster of new attitudes – "psychic mobility, empathy, cosmopoliteness, achievement motivation, and rising expectations" (81). As a consequence of these transformations, people, who for untold centuries had lived in enclosed subsistence communication, break out of their captivity and take the first faltering steps towards a fuller life. Eventually, communication creates "altered psychological states and begins to generate wants which become increased demand" (81).

Moores (1993), on the other hand, argues that hardware can be seen as a collection of signs that have multi-accentual social meanings and are capable of being decoded and appropriated in a plurality of ways within the context of household cultures. Hence, they serve as contested cultural symbols.

Apart from being cultural symbols, communication technologies serve other social uses. TV, in particular, serves as a behavior regulator that can structure its audience's domestic time, punctuating their daily activities and duties. For example, Hobson's (in Moores 1993) study on women's consumption of TV describes how housewives are caught between providing the family's meals and watching TV. Lacson's (1994) investigation of cable TV viewing among selected families from Manila and Tacloban reveals that these families have incorporated TV viewing into their lifestyles to the extent that TV is "punctuating the household's routines" (Abstract) and becoming a main source of relaxation and entertainment.

With regard to the mobile phone, Dhar & Sharma (2002) contend that mobile phones can help in the emancipation of the poor from the "claustrophobic

control" (57) of the powerful elite. However, the poor are constrained by their inability to buy a phone; acquiring one is not in their priority list because there are more pressing needs that they have to attend to.

Fortunati (2003), for his part, describes the mobile phone as a diffusion agent, possessing the ability to promote democratization of informed citizens who are able to communicate with one another. On the other hand, based on the findings of their study on the different practices, ethical attitudes, and identities of college and high school mobile phone users, Pepito & Perez (2003) concurred with Rasmussen's (2003) argument that new technology creates new contexts for interaction.

Research Questions

This paper's central research questions are: How and in what contexts do urban poor married couples use and ascribe meanings to the mobile phone? How do these meanings contribute to their world-making? What changes occur in the couple's self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and values?

Working on the premise that information and communication technologies (ICTs) are effecting changes throughout the whole range of the economic, social, cultural and political life of all societies (Reddi 1987), this paper examines the connection between mobile phone communication and the personal development of its users. Specifically, this paper seeks to: draw a profile of the informants and their communities; find out the reasons and the context of their acquisition and use of the mobile phone; determine the types of messages given and received from the mobile phone and the meanings attached to these; and assess the manner in which married couples acquire, use, assign meanings to, and interpret communication technologies.

Study Framework

This study utilizes for its framework the Social Construction of Technology Theory, as adapted from the Social Construction of Reality Theory. Its principal argument is that people construct reality or worldviews through the use of ICT. This process of construction starts with their cognizance of ICT, which leads to their acknowledgement of its importance. This then guides their choices for and manner of using ICT, which then influence the way they conduct their day-to-day life. From one's self to other individuals, such as the husband or the wife, then to groups and communities, the constructed reality spreads and becomes well-entrenched in the individuals' consciousness, as well as in society's.

Interspersed within this process of reality construction is the constant interpretation of the ICT texts and messages, meaning-making, and world-making. This means that users of ICT and media texts negotiate meaning and develop their own worldviews and behavior based on their relationship with the media or ICT (Aufelderheide 2001). In this relationship, "it is not just program content that affects identity but also the use and presence of various technologies" (Sarbin & Kituse 1995: 4). Thus, the technology either determines the self or the self controls the technology as it deems fit or appropriate.

Moreover, like all other forms of communication, communication through ICTs is governed by rules and these rules are formed by how the ICTs are experienced (adapted from the Social Construction of Emotions in Littlejohn 1999). The rules involve:

a) *appraisal*, which involves examining what ICT is, where it is directed and whether its effects are positive or negative;
b) *behavior*, which defines the manner by which one responds to the ICT; it could take the form of hiding, expressing publicly, becoming neutral, knowing how to behave, and knowing how to respond to the ICT;
c) *prognosis*, which defines progress and determines the length of time in the use of ICT; and
d) *attribution*, which provides an explanation and justification of the occurrence of the phenomenon.

Applied to this paper, these rules refer to the way the married couples select the technologies, the type of behavior that they adopt due to the technology, and the meaning that they attach to it. This analysis of the rules brings to fore the married couples' regard for themselves and the impact of the mobile phone on them.

Research Methods

The study on which this paper is based utilizes a dominantly qualitative design in its investigation of the various aspects of the married couples' use of the mobile phone. Employing focus group discussions (FGD) and key informant interviews (KII), the study probes into the informants' ownership and use of, as well as experiences in using, the mobile phone. Necessarily, this researcher considers the situational contexts in which the mobile phone is used and interpreted; hence, an ocular inspection of the research site was done.

Purposeful sampling was used in selecting the informants, who must meet the following criteria: they are residents of an urban poor community i.e., in this study, Sitio San Roque, Barangay Pag-asa, Quezon City; they are married and

belong to a low income family (i.e., income falls below P8,000 a month); and they are owners and regular users of a mobile phone. The sample included 12 wives and 14 husbands who were separate discussants in two FGDs as well as separate interviewees in several KIIs.

The informants were selected with the help of gatekeepers — the community relation workers of the National Housing Authority. The FGDs were held at the College of Mass Communication and at the office of the urban poor organization, Kasama, Inc. located in Sitio San Roque.

Findings

Profile of Sitio San Roque

This paper's key informants belong to the third generation of Sitio San Roque families who started to inhabit the place in the 1970s, during which a couple of workers or employees from the Manila Seedling Bank, located in Quezon City, brought their families from the province, constructed makeshift houses, and started to plant vegetables in the nearby vacant lot. Soon, relatives of the original families followed suit and constructed *barong-barong* or shanties in the area. Despite the National Housing Authority's repeated attempts to demolish the mushrooming houses, the families managed to return and rebuild their houses surreptitiously. They even encouraged their friends, *kumpares,* and *kumares*, with the apparent consent of a community leader, to move into the area. Thus their number increased as years passed by (Kasama, Inc. n.d.).

The informants come from a population of approximately 8,000 families who are now occupying about 20% of the 53 has. of government property[4]. The remaining 10 has. comprise the lots for the residential and commercial houses, including open spaces allotted for plazas, recreational facilities, pathways or alleys, and the community's road network.

In the mid-1980s, when democratic elections were reinstituted, the increasing number of residents represented a correspondingly significant number of votes, thus urging Barangay Pag-asa to adopt the area of San Roque as one of its *sitios*. This politically motivated move lent an air of legitimacy to the residents and induced droves of relatives and friends to construct their houses there. To oppose the possible demolition of their houses, the residents organized themselves into the San Roque Homeowners Association (SRHA). Soon after, other neighborhood associations likewise emerged (Kasama, Inc. n.d.).

During the 1990s, the presence of a real community in Sitio San Roque became obvious. The area was transformed into a commercial area. Stores selling food, clothes, utensils, hardware accessories, etc., as well as stalls offering

services ranging from dental clinic, dress shop, beauty shop, electronic repair shops, barber shops, etc., simply sprouted all around and provided for the needs of the residents.

Chapels and places of worship were also erected. Soon, health centers and medical clinics were set up, making the erstwhile squatter area a normal community. In 1990, the residents' associations pushed for the electrification of the area. The leaders of the associations also participated in various fora that tackled issues confronting the urban poor.

The enticing environment

The internal and external environments maintain and sustain the residents' awareness and, to a certain extent, use of state-of-the-art mobile phone technology.

Lying in the heart of Quezon City, San Roque[5] looks like a typical urban poor community in every way. It maintains a main road that exhibits – on either side – the interspersing residential houses, public market, beauty parlors, barbershops, curio shops, and variety stores. It may be an urban poor community, but, nonetheless, it is able to keep up with the times – setting up the necessary infrastructure and support services, particularly, for the mobile phone users among its residents. Many of the abovementioned structures sell not only foodstuff and other household needs, but also offer mobile phone services and accessories, e.g., prepaid cards, electronic or e-loading, and mobile phone repairs. Mobile phone poster advertisements form part of their façade, indicating that the owners or operators of these commercial establishments know that the mobile phone is the "in" thing among Filipinos nowadays.

Profile of informants

There are 12 wives and 14 husbands – who are unrelated by marriage to one another – who served as this paper's key informants. The wives have been married for an average of 19 years, with the youngest having been married for five years and the oldest, for 33 years. The husbands, meanwhile, have been married for an average of 30 years – the youngest for the past 21 years and the oldest, 49 years.

The husbands' ages range from 44 to 61 years. Most of them have a high school or college education. Their jobs consist mostly of contractual services, such as plumbing, carpentry, and electrical works, from which they draw minimum wage income.

The wives, meanwhile, belong to the age range of 25 to 53 years. Most have reached high school level and some are high school graduates. None of them has gainful employment outside the home; all are housekeepers. However,

to supplement the meager income of their husbands, some wives engage in home-based buy-and-sell businesses. Two tend sari-sari stores, while six are distributors of personal care and home products such as Natasha, Avon, Triumph, Power-up, and Forever Living. These are the wives whose children have already grown up and, according to them, "*hindi na alagain*" (loosely translated, "can take care of themselves").

The families' other sources of financial support include monetary assistance from richer relatives and remittances from OFW-relatives. Some are deep in debt due to loans from the neighborhood usurers[6], friendly neighbors, and sari-sari store or *suking tindahan*.

A big majority of the informants are Roman Catholics, a significant number of whom are El Shaddai members. The rest are Born Again Christians. Most of them have an average of five children, notwithstanding their varied modes of family planning practice.

Some of the informants have lived in the area for more than 30 years. These third generation settlers have pledged to continue the struggle to keep their lots. Many of those who have left the community and who have actually improved their economic condition still retain their houses in San Roque. Others have completely moved out, bequeathing the lot and the structures to their relatives.

Introducing the mobile phone

Exposure to the mobile phone is simply unavoidable, i.e., informants report seeing the mobile phone gadget in the hands of friends or peers from richer families, among people in the malls, and in media programs and advertisements. Moreover, the immediate environment itself has exposed the informants to the new technologies. As mentioned, San Roque is a short distance from major shopping areas where mobile phone and computer stores proliferate. Not surprisingly, the informants regard the acquisition of a mobile phone desirable and attractive.

Using the mobile phone for the first time was a struggle for the informants. They learned how to text messages, not from the mobile phone manuals or brochures (most of their mobile phones were second-hand units and therefore did not have these), but from their children, neighbors, or friends. Some husbands learned to operate the mobile phone through their wives or vice-versa, depending on who acquired the mobile phone first.

Most of the informants can operate the mobile phone, although not as well as their children. Compared to their children who show dexterity and can easily manipulate the complicated operations of the mobile phone, the informants tend to be less adventurous in trying the various functions of the device. The

most popular activity is that of sending text messages and, on rare occasions, making calls that are ended soon after to save on costs. The other features of the mobile phone, such as the clock, radio, alarm, calendar, and organizer, are not well-utilized.

Some older informants are dependent on their children for the operation of the mobile phone because of the couples' poor eyesight. Their children usually do the texting for them. The agility with which the youngsters compose their messages is a skill that the informants cannot compete with. While it takes them several minutes to compose a message or text, the youngsters can swiftly finish the same task in seconds.

Modes of acquisition

The informants acquired their cell phones in one of the following ways:

1. **Installment** – The usual mode of acquiring the mobile phone is by installment, whether or not the unit is brand-new, second-hand, or re-conditioned. The few among them who own brand-new mobile phones have bought these from enterprising friends who run buy-and-sell businesses. These friends sell the mobile phone to neighbors or referrals on a *hulugan*, *four-gives,* or *paiyakan*[7] (installment) basis, with a 20% mark-up on the cash price.

It is usually the wives who enter into this type of arrangement. Because they are the mainstays at home, they get to talk to enterprising neighbors and to walk-in businesspersons or representatives with all sorts of promotional offers. The husbands do not meddle in the negotiation process, unless consulted by the wives, which is often the case. But they leave most of the decision-making to their wives, who control the family's budget.

2. **Cash** – Some informants purchased the gadgets, whether brand-new or second-hand, in cash. Those who bought new units did so through the money sent by OFW or rich relatives, and through scrimping or belt-tightening. Meanwhile, buyers of second-hand units got theirs from such places as Virra Mall, Greenhills, Quiapo, Recto, and Caloocan, where bargains can be found[8].

The decision to buy in cash is jointly made by the couple, but it is the wife who takes care of saving or scrimping to be able to buy the much-coveted gadget. This practice of scrimping to save money for a mobile phone highlights or exposes the values that the married couples subscribe to. Instead of generating funds for household needs, couples direct their efforts to raising funds for the purchase of a mobile phone. They can thus be regarded as testimonies to the victory or success of the mobile phone companies' advertisements.

These data are consistent with the findings of an earlier study of 18 urban poor barangays in Metro Manila, which revealed that urban poor residents managed to acquire TV and radio sets despite their professed difficulties in eking

out a living (Portus et al. 2002). Similarly, this current study found that the urban poor's pattern of expenditures favor the acquisition of communication and entertainment gadgets over improving their houses or enjoying nutritious food. Moreover, current findings indicate that the object of obsession has changed from the TV set to the mobile phone.

3. **Pawned by a neighbor** - A few of the informants acquired their mobile phone units from cash-strapped neighbors, who pawned the units to them. The neighbors eventually failed to redeem the mobile phones and sold these to the informants.

In such instances, the husband conducted the negotiations, although the actual pawning involved the wife. This again shows the degree of freedom given to the wives in the acquisition of gadgets. However, the husband's role is still considerable as he participated in the final negotiations to make sure that his wife was not shortchanged in the deal. Besides, he contributed the bigger share of the funds in the actual purchase of the mobile phone.

Ownership of mobile phones

Signs of poverty are not evident among the informants of this study, if one were to use as an indicator the number of mobile phones that their families possess. According to the informants, most families or households in San Roque own two to four mobile phone units – one for each parent and two for their children. The units are usually acquired one after the other with a one-year interval. The latest model or the better unit would usually go to the father and the hand-me-downs, to the wife or children.

The hand-me-down system reveals the priority given to the husband when it comes to having the latest model. Both husband and wife agree that it is only fitting and proper for the husband, being the breadwinner, to have the latest gadget. It is his right to choose the best model from among the mobile phones that the family possesses because most of the money comes from him.

Nokia phones are considered the better models. According to the informants, this is the brand that they see being used by many rich people they know. They also often see this brand on TV. The most popular Nokia models are 3310, 3210, 3315, and 5110 (see Table 1). A few of the informants originally owned Ericsson, Trium, and Philips units, until the owners decided to sell or donate these to relatives in favor of better models. The owners replaced these brands with new ones because of the very limited storage capacity (i.e., 15 messages) of the older ones. According to them, "*Kailangan* delete *nang* delete, *para di mapuno. Mababa kasi ang kaya ng* cellphone *ko.*" (I should delete messages frequently so I do not use up the allowable number of messages. My phone has a low capacity to store messages.)

Table 1. Cellphone ownership by brand (as of 2003)

Brand Model	Percentage
Nokia 3310	60
Nokia 3210	20
Nokia 3315	20
Nokia 5110	10
Nokia 7110	5
Other Brands	
(Ericsson, Trium, Philips)	10

Mobile phone users and uses

The reasons for acquiring a mobile phone are both social and functional. The social reasons range from expanding social networks to "keeping up with the Joneses", so to speak. Meanwhile, the functional reasons range from monitoring the whereabouts of family members, to enhancing economic activities and performing one's roles and functions as a leader in the community. These reasons reflect the kind of world that these informants make through the mobile phone.

In operational terms, the following are the uses of the mobile phone for the husbands and wives:

a) **Husbands –** Most of the husband-informants regard the mobile phone as indispensable during emergencies. Their families are able to contact them in cases of need, e.g., brownouts, fires, gang wars, etc. These uses indicate the importance accorded to the husband, particularly to his role as protector of the family. The biggest consideration in acquiring a mobile phone, given that a squatter area is not really that safe, is the "proximity" of the husbands to their respective families.

In normal times (i.e., when there are no emergencies), the husband-informants claim that they use the mobile phone mainly for business purposes, especially in contacting friends who could give them business or extra work. This signifies the usefulness of the mobile phone to someone who is on the look out for "*pagkakakitaan*" (income-generating opportunities).

b) **Wives –** The wife-informants use the mobile phone to monitor their children's whereabouts, activities, companions, schedules of activities, and time of arrival. The mobile phone, in these cases, serves as an extension of parental authority, allowing them to exercise their role outside the home. To the wife-informants, the mobile phone has made them less worried and stressed because they know where their children are and what is happening to them.

The wives also use the mobile phone to send SMS or text messages to their husbands to find out their whereabouts, but they do not send text messages to their husbands as frequently as they do their children. When texting their

husbands, they claim that "*Kinukumusta namin sila kung kumain na o pauwi na*" (We ask them if they have taken their meal or whether they are already on their way home). These text messages reveal care and concern about their husbands' safety and well-being. In the past, such expressions of concern were vague and inconsistent, but they have now become more constant and unequivocal. Whenever their husbands come home late, or work overnight, or stay with friends, using the mobile phone can readily ease the wife-informants' anxiety.

One wife-informant has discovered an important use of the mobile phone, i.e., counseling. She said that the mobile phone has allowed her to provide comfort and advice to an emotionally unstable friend. By texting inspirational and religious messages to her friend, she claims that that person has now become close to the Lord.

There are wife-informants who admit that they bought their mobile phone units because "*gusto naming makasabay sa mayayaman, tingin namin sosi kami pag may cellphone*" (we want to keep up with the rich, we feel we belong to high society when we use the mobile phone). Other informants call this *inggit* (envy). "*Hindi naman mawawala yan*" (that cannot be avoided), they said.

Findings indicate that it is the wife-informants who aspire for the latest gadgets. Some women categorically stated that they would surely buy the top-of-the-line mobile phones, if they had the money. Such imitative behavior coupled with an attitude and desire "for the latest gadgets" are induced by advertisements. Promotional strategies of mobile phone companies spawn acquisitive behavior, which exert pressure on people to buy. But since the informants have insufficient income or savings to fulfill their desire, the pressure becomes even more heightened.

Meanwhile, according to the entrepreneurs amongst them, the mobile phone has improved their home-based business, such as buying and selling varied products (i.e., Avon, Natasha, and Triumph products; *tocino, longganisa,* and other foodstuff). That is, the mobile phone has been very useful in making business offers to and getting orders from customers.

Texting spouses

The wives send text messages to their husbands more often than the husbands do to their wives. The wives also claim that they text their children more frequently than their husbands. Unless necessary, the husbands do not regularly text their children. However, they regularly text their wives because most of them feel obligated to do so, especially when their wives text them and are told to "*Tx bak*"[9] or "*sagot ka*" (please reply). As one husband explains:

> *Naku yang si misis, di pwedeng di i-text. Obligado, e. Baka isipin di ko pansin at baka magselos.* (I have to text my wife. I have to. She might think I am ignoring her and she might get jealous.)

Looking closely at the husbands' reasons for having a mobile phone, it appears that establishing constant communication with the wife is not a priority. Nonetheless, husbands say that their concern and care for the wife and children count among the 'emergency' reasons for having a mobile phone.

The above data suggest a certain sense of insecurity felt by the wives. The fact that all of them are not employed and spend most of their time at home probably makes them feel left out. The mobile phone thus becomes very important to them because, borrowing from Moores (1989), it becomes their "lifeline contact with the world". When boredom creeps in, the wives turn to their mobile phone to communicate with their husbands, children, relatives, and friends.

When queried about whether jealousy is a reason why they text their husbands, some wives said nonchalantly, *"Hindi mo naman maaalis iyon siyempre, lalaki sila"* (You can't help it, they are men). This suggests that the double standard of morality still persists among couples. What is revealing is the acceptance of this standard by some of the informants, rationalizing that they are "men". It reinforces what feminists regard as an erroneous patriarchal argument that men, because they are men, have the right to be unfaithful; while the wives, because they are women, should stick to one partner. This also underpins the mistaken notion that men are polygamous by nature.

Mobile phone gender discourse

Undoubtedly, the way wives and husbands use the mobile phone manifests certain gender issues in their perceptions and attitudes. From the male informants' discourses, in particular, one is able to glean that husbands ascribe various characteristics and roles to their wives. More specifically, the husbands see their wives, and women in general, as big spenders, as mainly responsible for their children, as home mainstays, and as having peripheral concerns.

a) **Wives as big spenders and talkers –** Some husbands attribute the relatively big expenditure on mobile phone prepaid cards to their wives' propensity to talk. They claim that women are *"mahilig mangapit-bahay, kasi walang masyadong ginagawa"* (fond of going to their neighbors, since there is not much to do at home). Nonetheless, these husbands appreciate the advent of the mobile phone because now the wives remain at home while "conversing" (texting) with their text mates. However, they find their wives' practice quite expensive:

Mas magastos ang babae, kasi marami silang tini-text; madalas maubusan si misis ng load kasi ang daming tini-text. Puro tsismis naman. Laging nagtsitsismis at mapagtanong (Women incur relatively bigger expenses because they text a lot of people; they always indulge in idle talks and they are very inquisitive).

On women's proclivity for big spending, the male informants further say, "*Maarte ang mga babae, maraming borloloy na kinakabit sa cellphone*" (Women are so fond of details. They put many accessories on their cellphones.) The women are allegedly fond of logos, pictures, ring tones, and mobile phone accessories like colorful straps and holders, and housing and mobile phone covers. In particular, the younger wives install a variety of decorations on their mobile phones, e.g., apparently dissatisfied with the original light or color, they replace this with a backlight color of white, green, or blue. *"Sa labas meron pang umiilaw-ilaw, ewan kung para saan yon"* (Outside, there is something that lights up. I do not know what that accessory is for), says one of the informants, referring to the magnetic incoming message alert signal, or waves protector.

In contrast, the husbands do not decorate their mobile phones. They simply put the mobile phones in their pockets, although some of them have cases that usually come with the mobile phone as promotional give-aways. Moreover, husbands claim that they are less profligate than their wives and that they only send text messages when necessary: *"Hindi kami nagte-text ng hindi importante. Hindi naman mahilig sa tsismis ang lalake"* (We do not send text messages that are not important. Men are not fond of gossip).

A running joke that ignites boisterous laughter among the husbands is the attribution of this trait of loquaciousness to the "fact" that women "have two mouths". This particular perception fortifies the gender bias that women are fond of idle talk or *tsismis*. Some wives confirm this, saying that they use the mobile phone for *chika* (news updating between friends) with friends. They say that they have to do this, otherwise they will feel bored or lonely at home doing their household routines. Instead of the word *tsismis*, they prefer to use *chika* – a term that to them means "socializing", as opposed to rumor-mongering.

Most of the interchanges among the women include anything under the sun, but, almost always, the messages concern the children, husbands, beauty secrets, cooking tips, movie stars, and updates on their *barkada* (peers and buddies). They also share jokes, as well as religious and inspirational messages, through text forwarding. They exchange greetings during birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas, New Year, and Valentine's Day.

Meanwhile, some husband-informants interpret their wives' being "too" solicitous as an indication of the women's distrust of their husbands. Some of

the women-informants report instances of husbands taking mistresses or living a bachelor's way of life. The mobile phone has become their tool for monitoring their husbands' activities.

b) **Wives as mainly responsible for children –** Some informants see a different reason why the wives send more text messages than the husbands do. They claim that mothers are chiefly responsible for monitoring their children's whereabouts, and that women are born ("created") to be care-takers of their children and husbands:

> *Dapat bilang nanay, siya ang may alalahanin sa mga anak. Siya ang babae, kaya siya ang dapat mag-text sa mga anak. Kaya pwedeng mauna siyang magka-cellphone kesa sa akin.* (It is fitting and necessary that, being the mother, she should be taking care of the children. Being the woman, she should contact [through text] her children. That's why she can own a mobile phone ahead of me).

This belief evokes the Biological Determinism Theory that celebrates the nurturing role of women. As explained by Tojos in her dissertation (1999: 11):

> . . . women, being the child-bearers, are logically the nurturers. Thus, their functions are to stay at home and take care of the children. This thinking has been embedded in the consciousness of the Filipinos, especially with the reinforcement by various institutions like the Church, education, and media, among others.

c) **Wives as home mainstays –** Support for the idea that women – because they are home mainstays – should have mobile phones is evident in comments such as this:

> *Dahil nasa bahay lang sila, kailangan ng kausap at mapagtatanungan; kaming mga lalake nasa labas, nagtatrabaho, iba-iba ang nakakasalamuha"* (since they only stay at home, they need someone to talk to and consult with; we, the menfolk, are out, working and interacting with various types of people).

This implies that women lack exposure to events, have small worlds, and tend to look for someone to talk to. For them, the mobile phone has become a good home companion. Thus, the wives' world-making follows that of Dordick & Wang's (1993) view that the people's own *limited* experiences imprison their

consciousness and lessen their world-making activity. They contend that: "Locked within their own experiences, they have no way of knowing what is available to them. If they could be made aware of the gains made in other parts of the world, they would have a different perception of what they could become" (81).

This statement highlights the need for access to information, which the media, including the mobile phone, may well provide. Dordick & Wang (1993) claim that technologies are the fastest means for making change happen. They add that, with the information or knowledge that they could get from technologies, people "would abandon their traditional ways and refuse to be gratified with producing only for their immediate needs" (23). In the case of the wife-informants, this means uncovering a path that leads out of their confinement to the home and dependence on their husbands for finances and decision-making.

d) **Wives as having peripheral concerns –** Some of the husband-FGD discussants claim that the mobile phone is *"para sa mga importanteng bagay"* (for important matters) and this is exactly how they use the mobile phone. The term *importante,* for the husbands, refers to their roles and functions as decision-makers and breadwinners.

Husbands claim that their wives use the mobile phone for *"hindi gaanong importanteng bagay"* (not so important, or frivolous, matters), i.e., idle talk, husband monitoring, and social relationships. Husbands do not see the value in their wives' socialization; rather they see this as mere engagement in *tsismis*. Moreover, they do not see their wives' regular texting as a sign of their concern for their husbands; rather, they see this as an indication of their wives' distrust of them. Thus, they believe that their wives use the mobile phone imprudently.

Mobile phones and marital rifts

The mobile phone can cause marital rifts or even break-ups among husbands and wives. The informants were quick to cite the quarrel of celebrities[10], evidencing the perception that relationship break-ups facilitated by the mobile phone occurs across social classes. Romantic messages or any seemingly innocent message could cause one jealous partner to be suspicious and start nagging the other. Some of the participants attest to such problems threatening their relationship with their spouses:

> *Kung minsan ang tsismis ay pinapaniwalaan ni misis kaya kami nag-aaway.*
> (Sometimes, my wife would believe in gossips; thus, triggering a quarrel between us.)

The so-called *tsismis* may be transmitted through the mobile phone. Although text messages may come from anonymous sources, these can still arouse suspicion in one of the spouses and lead to violent confrontations. The resulting shouting bouts and harangues can eventually lead to the couple's separation:

> *Mayroon talagang nagki-create ng tsismis, at gustong mag-away ang mag-asawa. Kunyari, babae na tatawag sa asawa mo para mang-intriga, minsan nasisira pamilya. Mayroon ding totoo, mayroong hindi* (There are some who really spread gossip to stir up quarrel between spouses. A strange woman may pretend to call one's husband to sow intrigue, which may cause a family's break-up. There may be truth in some, lies in others).

Another wife informant attests:

> *Kung minsan may mga messages na lumulusot na akala ng asawa ko ay talagang para sa akin. Nagseselos siya at tinatanong pilit kung sino 'yon. Talagang wala naman kaya away kami. Kaya ginawa ko, binenta ko na lang ang cellphone ko para wala kaming pag-aawayan* (Once in a while, messages appeared on my mobile phone that my husband thought were intended for me. He would become jealous and pressure me to reveal the source of the message. The truth is, I really do not know, so we would end up fighting. Finally, I decided to sell my mobile phone to do away with the cause of the quarrels.).

These instances attest to Hall's (1986 in Slack 1989) argument that technologies (mobile phone) have complex connections of elements or identities that may include "social practices, *discursive statements* [emphasis the author's], ideological positions, social forces or social groups" (331), and to Slack's (1987: 332) contention that "new technologies might just as likely be connected to *destructive forces* [emphasis the author's] as to progressive ones".

This paper thus recognizes the positive and negative effects of the mobile phone on social networks and personal/interpersonal relationships. It would seem that the mobile phone has become an important instrument and arena whereby discourses between spouses take place. The couples have been affected negatively by the capacity of the mobile phone to provide damaging information. In the case cited above, the wife put the blame on the mobile phone as the trigger for her quarrel with her husband and believed that without the mobile phone, the fights might not have erupted at all. The impact of the technology must have been so potent that the quarreling couples have allowed the mobile phone to get in the way of their relationship. This researcher wonders whether the quarrels have ceased since the mobile phone has been disposed of.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that married couples have different uses and interpretations of the mobile phone, reflecting the world that each person constructs in the process. For the husbands, the mobile phone is a business tool that has facilitated their perennial job search and helped in maintaining their relationships with business partners.

For the wives, meanwhile, the mobile phone is an interactive companion and a virtual umbilical cord connecting them to their children, husbands, relatives, and friends. They use the technology to form new associations, enlarge their network, learn more about the world, and interact more frequently with family members and friends.

There have been noticeable changes in the self-perception of the informants due to the mobile phone. Being able to keep up with the rich makes some of the wives feel good. One can surmise, given their expressed desires, that the wife-informants communicate their self-worth by means of what they possess, rather than by what they really think or feel and how they socialize.

However, the married couples' perceptions on the mobile phone and how to use it suggest the subtle and lingering influence of traditional and societal beliefs, particularly that of the husband's or the male's supremacy and power in the household, and that of the wife's primary role or responsibility in nurturing and "taking care" of the husband and their children. This particular regard or perception is expected in the context of the wives' traditional role as mainstays in the home. This same regard or perception has actually limited the women's world (outlook) to the confines of the home and the immediate neighborhood.

Moreover, the mobile phone seems to intensify the gender bias that puts the husband's concerns as the focal point in household matters, and the wife's own particular concerns at the periphery. While, on the one hand, the mobile phone has been found essential to the nurturing character of housewives, on the other hand, it has also been regarded as inflating the image of the wives as talkative and distrustful of their husbands.

Notes

1. This paper is an excerpt from the author's doctoral dissertation. The dissertation investigates the urban poor's technology literacy, which shows, or does not show, in their use of the mobile phone. The author contends that users of the mobile phone create worlds that reveal or conceal their identity, values, relationships, and critical outlook in life. One of the most interesting findings in this dissertation is the discourse that transpires between married couples, which this paper presents.
2. The term *texting* pertains to the short message service (SMS) feature of mobile phones. Meanwhile, the term *text* can be used in two ways. If used as a noun, it means the message sent, e.g., "I sent a text." If used as verb, it pertains to the action of sending a message, e.g. "I will text you."
3. The term *cellphone* is more commonly used than *mobile phone* in the Philippines. In this paper, the two terms are used interchangeably.
4. Sixteen (16) of the 53 has.-area is occupied by the Metro Railway Transit (MRT) depot facing EDSA. Another 27 has. is occupied by the Metro Manila Transit Corporation (MMTC) garage facilities, located along North Avenue; the Manila Seedling Bank Foundation's (MSBF) office, along EDSA and Quezon Avenue; the Central Fire Station, along Agham Road; and the Occupational Safety and Health Center (OSHC), along North Avenue and Agham Road.
5. Sitio San Roque is enclosed by Agham Road, North Avenue, EDSA, and Quezon Avenue. It is walking distance to a large shopping mall (Shoemart North Edsa) and a short ride away from the Quezon City Hall, University of the Philippines, different government offices, and middle-class subdivisions.
6. In the local slang, these are the "*bombay*".
7. The terms *hulugan*, *four-gives*, and *paiyakan* refer to the manner of repaying debts. They all mean installment but the degree of ease in paying the debt varies. *Hulugan* is paying the debt in definite installments, which is either fixed by the seller or agreed upon by the debtor and the seller. "Four-gives" is the literal translation of *apat na bigay* or four equal installments. This could mean four (4) times a month for those who receive salaries on a weekly basis, or it could mean paying the loan for a period of two months for those who receive salaries every 15th and 30th of the month. *Paiyakan* or "shedding-tears method" is the worst kind of installment because the debtor encounters difficulty in recouping the money, so that sometimes even the collector sheds tears in frustration.
8. Php1,500 to Php2,000 per unit.
9. SMS sending or texting has spawned its own spelling and grammar protocols, depending very heavily on short-cuts in both Pilipino and English languages.
10. One celebrity break-up case commonly cited was that of actors Kris Aquino and Joey Marquez that started with the text message of a woman, allegedly Marquez' lover.

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Lourdes M. Portus *is an assistant professor at the Department of Communication Research, University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication and currently the college secretary of UP CMC. She obtained her master's degree in Communication Research from UP CMC. This paper is excerpted from her dissertation for her Ph.D. in Communication in the same college. Prior to joining UP, she was division manager at the National Housing Authority, where she worked with the urban poor.*