

Mobile Phones and Migrant Workers in Malaysia

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Abstract

The inflow of migrant workers within the Asian region has been a significant phenomenon. With the growth of Asian economies, reliance on the supply of migrant workers has become more important to sustain competitiveness especially in labor-intensive sectors. Malaysia, for one, is a large importer of labor in the region. An estimated 16 per cent of the country's total employed workforce is comprised of foreign workers with vital communication and information needs.

The paper examines how mobile phones have become significant devices for migrant workers to adapt to new environments. The paper looks into: (1) the information and communication needs and practices specifically of Indonesian, Filipino, and Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia (2) their aspirations and interests on entertainment, local content, and media consumption; and (3) their social networks in their host environments.

Through in-depth interviews and photo novellas (picture stories), the paper investigates how migrant use of mobile phones paves the way for forming and maintaining social circles that are integral in their lives away from home. The lifestyles and mobile phone culture of selected Filipino, Indonesian and Bangladeshi migrant workers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia reflect how links with their own home countries are sustained with mobile technology as a tool. The paper hopes to shed light on the role played by mobile usage in building social capital and inclusion among migrant workers in Malaysia.

Introduction

Migrant workers in Malaysia is a significant sector given its size and contribution to the economies of the migrant workers' host and home countries. Based on available figures in 2006², about 1.8 million or 16 per cent of the Malaysian labor force are contract migrant workers, with roughly over 500,000 to over a million as irregular migrants. Their countries of origin include Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Myanmar, Vietnam, and the Philippines. These migrant workers are found in the manufacturing, plantation, domestic services, agriculture and construction sectors. In Sabah, 50 per cent of the total labor force are migrant workers (mainly from Indonesia and the Philippines) with an average of 50 per cent of income repatriated through telegraphic transfers, bank drafts, and informal channels.

There is a lack of knowledge and understanding on this segment which comprise a sizeable part of the Asian market workforce. There are perceived communication, information, entertainment,

² *Data and Profile of Migrant Workers in Malaysia. (n.d.)*
<http://www.fes.org.ph/pdf/Marktplace%20%20BWI.pdf>

and other basic needs for this segment. There is also substantial usage of mobile phones that can be a source of revenues for services designed around migrant workers' needs.

As gleaned from previous studies, international calls with relatives working abroad are reported to be significant (especially calls concerning remittances). This can be a driver of mobile communication especially among the financially-constrained as seen in Bangladesh.

The objectives of this study are:

- To understand the information and communication needs and practices of migrant workers in Malaysia, namely, Bangladeshi, Indonesian, and Filipino migrant workers;
- To understand their social networks in their host/home environments; and
- To understand their aspirations as well as constraints to them.

This study is an explorative qualitative study which focuses on three migrant worker groups namely, Bangladeshis, Indonesians, and Filipinos.

Twenty-four (24) in-depth interviews and three context interviews with recruitment agencies dealing with Bangladeshi, Filipino, Indonesian manpower needs in Malaysia were conducted. Respondents were eight Bangladeshis, eight Indonesians, and eight Filipinos, aged 21 to 45 years. There were eight females and 16 males representing the domestic service and construction industries, and having more than a year's stay in Malaysia. All respondents were mobile phone users and owners. Only one is a mobile phone user but a non-owner. Photographs taken by respondents, together with observation, were used to provide insights on the migrant workers' lifestyle.

About the Migrant Worker

A primary reason for finding work in Malaysia is to earn better for the family. With Malaysia's growing economy, workers from neighbouring South and Southeast Asian countries seek employment in Malaysia to meet the demands in the domestic labour market. There are two main entry points for the migrant worker in getting a job in Malaysia. One, as worker who goes through the process of recruitment by an agency. The worker is documented, gets his papers approved, and is issued a work permit before being deployed to the employer. The second entry point is as student. Upon entering Malaysia to take up a course, on computers, for instance, the person would apply for a part-time job individually, and after the student visa expires, would exit Malaysia and return as tourist, a direct hire, or as recruited by an agent.

The first month upon the arrival of the migrant worker is a crucial transition period. Agents need to get permit or call-in visa for workers. Legalizing their stay and getting the worker into the employer's hands is vital. On the part of the migrant worker, homesickness, adjustment to a new environment and communication are key concerns. Those who are newly-arrived also sometimes experience difficulty in reaching people back home. As one Filipina respondent mentioned:

First month, I am always homesick, feel lonely. I wanted to go back. I just try to be patient, want to talk to them (family back home).

Migrant concerns and coping mechanisms

There are a number of challenges faced especially by the new migrant worker. **Communication** is a key issue. Difficulty in communicating in English or learning the local language is experienced. A domestic helper shared:

Communication is first problem. I try and learn. I can speak a little Malay. I have an American employer.

Some also experience problems in their **living conditions** and in obtaining agreed-upon **salaries**. Being cheated on by agencies and employers when it comes to salaries is a grave concern. This was expressed by a Bangladeshi migrant worker who spoke of the plight of his fellow Bangladeshi workers:

Sometimes companies do not provide them work. No food. Sometimes when a company needs only 200 people, they bring in 1,000 people and that's problem. Their boss did not provide salary and food to eat.

Obtaining the **documents** that would legalize their stay is also a main concern. Among Indonesian domestic helpers, for example, their passports are usually kept by their employers. A recruitment agent pointed out:

...if the workers move around and they lost this important document, and then the employer keeps their passport. Without the proper document, how are they going to prove the relationship?

Security issues are also encountered. Some migrant worker respondents expressed concerns on safety in their working place and accommodations. There are risks involved in going out, even on the way to work. A recruitment agent cited that some workers, especially cleaners, will get stopped by the police when they go to their work place despite having their identification cards. Handset theft, snatching, harassment in public places, are among those experienced:

A lot of crime happening around. Sometimes it's difficult for us to ask police for help.

They take money, handset. One time I give away my handset, that time one big knife and I gave my handset away. There's one time my pocket RM³ 4,000 they snatch also.

The **emotional** struggle of leaving family behind to work in a foreign land can take its toll for the migrant worker. These migrant workers are emotionally attached to family their loved ones back home. To combat loneliness, work becomes an outlet as a Filipina domestic helper discloses:

³ 1USD is approximately equivalent to 3.5 RM (Ringgit Malaysia).

I can't stop thinking about him (my child) so I have to do work non-stop so that I do not have time to think about it. Sometimes I overdo the work till the extent that my employer says, "Enough, it's good enough already to me."

As a way of coping, migrant workers resort to borrowing from friends or employers when short of money. Others have side businesses to earn extra income such as sewing, selling mobile reload, selling jewellery, among others.

Praying is also an important way of coping especially when there is no other recourse to address one's situation. This draws migrant workers to churches where they can find support. This holds especially true to Filipinos and those Indonesians who are Christians.

Places of convergence and time use

There are places where migrant workers converge when they take time off from work. Among these places are Kota Raya, IOI Mall, Jaya Jusco, Mydin, Lot 10, Sungei Wang, Bukit Bintang, Sunway Lagoon, KLCC, and Bangsar, all in the busy, central Kuala Lumpur area.

As regards time use, there are constraints and opportunities that can be seen. Those in the domestic services (Filipinos and Indonesians) and in sales (Bangladeshis) work long hours, and are less mobile. They can work six to seven days a week without having any holidays.

There are pockets of free time, however, usually after lunch and dinner time, night time, and Sundays.

Time is seen by the migrant workers as a precious commodity. They prefer to spend time on activities that can help them save or generate money, be informed, or keep in touch with friends and family.

Beyond work, some migrant workers also get to volunteer in community organizations and teach skills they know. What they do beyond work relates to knowledge, interests, and skills they would like to share. It seems these migrant workers who get involved in community work are not driven mainly by monetary benefits in doing so. It can be more for their self-fulfillment or self-expression which overrides any other consideration.

An Indonesian factory worker said:

Normally after went back home 5:45pm, and then I teach children reading Quran the prayer. They come to my place. One hour per day everyday. Monday to Friday.

A Filipina domestic helper, for her part, mentioned:

Last year I told the teacher in dress making that I know how to sew and I volunteer to teach. And the she said you're the one that I appoint you as the chief minister for the class. I help and volunteer there. I share my knowledge to my fellow student.

In this regard, migrant workers, especially those actively sharing their knowledge and skills, can be used as a resource to reach others in their own networks. With their roles as teachers and

volunteers, they possess a certain level of credibility and trust. They may be tapped as ambassadors for disseminating information that can also benefit their fellow migrant workers in their own communities.

Acquisition and use of mobile phones

Almost all respondents acquired their own mobile phone in Malaysia. Acquisition starts about one month or even years after arriving in Malaysia for work. Many have simple handsets and have limited competence on mobile settings. Having limited time and people around to help them out in using other functionalities restricts them to using the mobile only for calls and SMS. There was an expressed interest in photos but not so much for sharing with others. Family members back home tend to have simple handsets, as well. As one migrant worker puts it:

I cannot send pictures to my children because my children's handsets are not very high technology.

It was noted, however, that there were more advanced usage and handsets among the males and the youth. To them, they use the mobile phone for gaming, radio, mobile Internet, MMS, and maps. A young Indonesian migrant worker notes:

I listen to radio through mobile. My phone is much updated. I have everything like MMS: There is nothing I can't do.

Some respondents have acquired two or more phones through gifting from friends. Domestic workers tend to obtain handsets initially through employers to coordinate work tasks. Some migrant workers have two handsets with two SIMs. One handset may be for work, and another one for personal use:

I have two phones, one given by the employer (Maxis) and one private (DiGi).

Another instance is that one handset with SIM from the home country is used for receiving SMS from people back home. Another handset is used for a second line (e.g., DiGi) for outgoing calls to their home country.

Most respondents cite friends as their first source of information on choice of mobile operator. It is a strong influencing factor especially if the rest of one's friends are on a specific network. Other first contact points are television advertisements, newspapers, posters, and stores in shopping complexes.

Aside from these, the recruitment agency can be a channel to inform incoming migrant workers of local mobile networks. A responsible migrant worker in the group can act as a node. As a recruitment agent puts it:

If [there is] a group of workers, say 10 of them, we give them one DiGi SIM card. When they come in, they are already on that card so they can communicate with us...It's the elder

brother among them ([based on] age sometimes, experience, responsibility)...He is the one receiving instruction.

For the respondents, cost, coverage, service differentiation, and the phones given by their employer are important considerations for their choice of operators. What they find as attractive features in mobile network packages they choose include bonuses, reload credit, and birthday-related “freebies” (e.g. additional free SMS for birthday celebrant-subscribers). Since migrant workers are very cost-conscious, they appreciate having these “extras” as incentives to continue staying on their chosen networks.

There is mention though of migrant workers shifting to other networks because of congestion during special holidays (e.g., Christmas).

The migrant workers’ local language is used when sending SMS to family and friends back home. These local languages could be in Bahasa, Bangla, Pilipino, Bisaya, Tam-Tem-Boan (Sulawesi), and Javanese. It must be noted that it is their regional or community language which they use in communicating with people close to them in their home countries.

Sometimes English is also used among Bangladeshis and Filipinos when communicating with younger and/or educated friends and family members. With employers, English is commonly used with employers and it is sometimes mixed with Bahasa.

Media consumption

There appears to be limited media consumption among the migrant worker respondents. There is a lack of media devices noted. There is a presence, however, of shared devices. Some respondents either watch TV at their friends’ place or in public hang-out places such as, “mamak” stalls which are small eating places selling cheap food and are found all around Malaysia. For the younger computer-literate migrant worker, computers can be accessed at an office or at a friend’s house.

The most popular media device used for relaxation is the TV. There is some usage of radio, newspapers, and games but for others, going to the movies or spending for media is a waste of money:

Go to cinema means time lost, money lost.

When it comes to taste for local content, Malaysian becomes local over time. Some respondents like music from their home country, but also English songs and some Malay music. Their taste expands with exposure, and broadens over time. This is also influenced by their own local social network.

I listen to music and radio and English songs. Sometimes I’ll listen to Indonesian music. I bring the cassette from my home town.

Local content from home is not easily accessible. For example, the Bangladeshi music is not available to Bangladeshi migrant workers. Friends bring over music CDs and DVDs physically instead when they return to Malaysia.

The females seem to be more interested in movies and TV series. News are important, in particular for males. This pertains to local news about Malaysia (to include politics), news from home country (e.g., floods, sports, politics), and international news (e.g., happenings in Iran, Palestine). News from the village or hometown is delivered orally through social interaction in Malaysia or through phone back home.

Communication with family back home, mainly through calls and some SMS, is a life line emotionally. This is exemplified through the following quotes:

Call to my kids, talk to them almost every day. It has been 5 years already.

Once a week, 15-20 minutes. If you talk for a while only, your heart will not satisfy.

Essentially, migrant workers make calls when: (1) they miss their families; (2) follow-up on money transfers; (3) there are birthdays and other special occasions; and (4) handling work-related matters.

I will SMS on big occasions like when my son has birthday. I will call family when I miss them.

A Sense of Belonging: Community

Oftentimes, the migrant worker experiences isolation living in a foreign country without any form of social support.

I have no group here. My friends here are [from] Indonesia that I met randomly here. I only met them if I have the time such as Saturday and Sunday when they are not working. They are normally from construction and factory and they do not have so much friend.

Among Bangladeshi and Indonesian workers, we have not come across any organized groups or formal communities that cater to their social needs. Their social circles appear to be tighter and smaller and revolve mainly around people they live and work with.

The Filipinos, for their part, have organizations where migrant workers can go to for socializing, training, and resource-sharing. These organizations are church-based and government-initiated. For example, the Capability Enhancement Program for Migrant Workers is a center organized under the Catholic Archdiocese in Kuala Lumpur which seeks to improve learning of migrant workers through training courses on Bahasa Melayu, culinary arts, business, and automotive repair, among others that are offered there. Another example is the Filipino Workers' Resource Center which is attached to the Philippine Embassy. Training is also provided for in this center such as, English communication, reflexology, and computer education to facilitate and upgrade skills that can be used for current and future work.

Importance of networks and connections

An important factor for one's successful assimilation is through social circles and networks that are formed through involvement in larger groups such as, migrant communities and organizations. Those who were successful in navigating their way towards gaining more resources and influence

found a local person – a benefactor, supporter - who took him or her under his or her wings. This local person can allow for the migrant worker to be integrated into his/ her family. This supporter could also be a local spouse, a partner for business, or an employer-friend to recommend other jobs. A

Bangladeshi migrant worker turned business owner shared:

There's a Malay take me as godchild. His family always helps me. I start to get close because I did the renovation for this family. From there the relationship built. I call the guy's mother-in-law as mother and there's the relationship start. Some of them are my client. I renovate for their restaurant. They are "mamak", Malay or Chinese. All these are my customer.

Another migrant worker in the service sector mentioned:

My friend employer recommends me to the clinic...If without recommendation, I don't think I'm able to find that much of job.

Among the networks and connections of some migrant workers are relatives and friends who work and settle into Malaysia. They, together with family and friends in other countries, could be among those whom they regularly communicate with:

I call my wife and sisters in Norway. I have another sister in London. I got some friends in Canada, too.

Getting work, socializing, and the learning benefits of being part of a network is important.

Bringing migrant workers into Malaysia also involve other networks. These involve recruitment agencies, employers/companies, embassies, and government agencies both in the home and host countries. Recruitment agents source migrant labor from their own contacts in sending countries which also entails trust. A recruitment agent said:

We have colleague in other side. We have connection with them. This kind of thing is all about trust.

Migrant workers who have resources also extend help to their own fellow migrant workers and to people back home. The types of assistance they extend are on securing documents, making donations, and providing monetary aid in times of sickness. As one successful migrant worker who set up his own business declared:

If there's any problem, I will [be] in charge. I will look after my workers.

Sharing and gifting among migrant workers

Sharing and gifting among friends and home companions are practiced by the migrant workers. Among things that are commonly given and shared are mobile phones, rental and living expenses, music, video, clothes and other personal items as reflected in the following:

Actually if stay together means share. We 3 person share whatever we have.

I'm using Motorola, but this is not from Malaysia. My friend from Japan gave it to me.

Usually I'll send back clothes. They ask for mobile phone from me too. I send mobile phone before. (I give mobile phone to) My wife.

(Music, song from a movie) It's a music video. Munna sent it to me. I got it only from friends. I'm not very keen on buying things. My friends keep giving me things. Sometimes when they went out for shopping they will bring back something for me and say, "This is very cheap. I brought it for you."

Trust, friends, and building relationships through mobile

Most migrant workers put their trust on their employers. The employer is usually the first to be approached when the migrant worker has a concern. This may be due to the fact that there is no other person that would have the means to address the migrant worker's concern especially when it involves resources. Some respondents also expressed trust on friends and family concerning personal and money matters.

Others, however, withhold their trust in anyone due to previous experience.

There's a lot of Indonesian but I don't trust anybody even we are from the same country. In here, I even got cheated by people from the same country.

Friends are distinguished by interest, degree of closeness, race, and nationality. Friendships are sometimes forged randomly, in places of work, or in communities.

The mobile is seen to help them in maintaining friendships. As one quipped:

In the Filipino community, after talk to them in there, we exchange number so we will call or SMS each other.

There is also mention of finding potential spouses through mobile, especially among Bangladeshi migrant workers.

A lot of people are "mobile married". Talk, talk, talk and get married at the end. They send photo to each other and recommend family. If everything alright, they will get married.

Traditions, though, run deep. There is a need for approval from family members from back home to cement a relationship with a potential spouse. Nevertheless, the mobile can be an initial channel for communication among prospective partners.

Aspirations

Most migrant workers aspire to set up businesses at home. They see business as ensuring continuity of their livelihood after their employment. For Bangladeshi respondents who are into sales, they want to have a business in Malaysia, as well, if possible.

Another aspiration is the education of children and of one's self. Providing for the children's educational needs is a priority; but beyond, there are those who want to continue upgrading their knowledge and skills in the hope that they can put it to good use in the future.

I'm studying book keeping and computing. Maybe I can use that in future. Now I plan to [be] involved in baking. Because when I go back and no need to work here, we can start a business.

Owning a house in their country of origin and raising a family is also a common aspiration, particularly, among unmarried migrant workers. Since most of their time and earnings are devoted to supporting other family members and relatives, it is their wish to have something for their own and to have a piece of happiness by having a spouse and children who could look after them later on, and a house for their own security.

My wish is I'm able to buy a big house in my home town Davao. I wish I would never grow old because I haven't got a wife yet.

Role models and success stories

Migrant workers look up to friends or family members who have established themselves financially. It could be a cousin or an uncle who managed to set up a successful business by owning a fish pond, or a friend or co-worker who rose from the ranks and has accumulated wealth and influence. These role models show them that it is possible for a migrant worker to be successful through hard work, good relationships, partnerships, and local connection.

This successful type of migrant worker, once he builds up his resources, entrusts family members to take on his own business. He is also able to give back to his home community by providing opportunities for employment, educational opportunities, and livelihood. Shaheen, a Bangladeshi, who came to Malaysia over 10 years ago exemplifies this:

I started in this company as a cleaner. From that cleaning, I've been promoted from there step by step to a senior manager...I have my own business there (in Bangladesh). I have a 40 acre fish farm there. I have 17 workers work for me. That's my second business. I do have two restaurants here, too. I run everything at the same time. I'll just tell them what to do. I give the opportunity to my brother. My brother is handling the business. They can use the money inside. I teach him how to do it and everyone can use my money.

Conclusion

With the growth of Asian economies like that of Malaysia, reliance on the supply of migrant workers has become more important to sustain competitiveness especially in labor-intensive sectors. Increasing inflows of remittances to the labor-sending countries are an important source of financing not only for families but for national incomes, as well. (As the Asian Development Bank states in its 2008 outlook on migrant trends, total remittance inflows to developing Asia in 2007 are estimated to have reached \$108.1 billion, accounting for over one third of total global remittance inflows.)

Beneath the economic contribution made by migrant workers are human lives. Migrant workers are individuals who face challenges, have aspirations, and needs while they work overseas.

The mobile phone is seen as a tool for the migrant workers to help bridge their aspirations and needs. Aside from coordinating remittances and money matters through mobile, it becomes useful in maintaining emotional ties with family and friends. Inclusion is facilitated with new ties and

relationships built in their host countries through mobile use. Expanding one's own networks are also facilitated which are so essential for their successful adaptation to their new environments.

As an Indonesian informant mentioned, the most important belongings he has in Malaysia are his passport and mobile phone. This signifies that aside from the necessity to establish his identity in a foreign land, the mobile phone is considered a significant lifeline to home and his immediate community.

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