Glocal intimacies and the contradictions of mobile media access in the Philippines

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Abstract
This piece teases out the links between this special issue's key themes regarding performance and citizenship and the distinct realities of transitional democracies. This article looks at mobile media access in the Philippines and the kind of social intimacies that have emerged from it. To frame our discussion, we use the concept of 'glocal intimacies'. This pertains to how mobile technologies have normalised and intensified the entanglement of people's relationships of closeness with the ever-shifting and constantly negotiated flows between global modernity and local everyday life. We show that the uneven access that Filipinos have has led to equally uneven ways in which they imagine and enact intimate relationships. Drawing on case studies emblematic of the country's key income clusters, we point out the emergence of a contradictory situation, wherein those with relatively high-quality access are those who are least dependent on mobile media for their glocal intimacies. Meanwhile, those with relatively low- quality access are those who are actually most dependent on mobile-mediated communication for such intimacies.

This article brings together concerns about universal access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) and about people's everyday lived realities of digital intimacies. The scholarship about universal access takes a macro approach to the increasing importance of access to digital media, particularly in the global South. It underscores the need to develop the technological infrastructure that paves the way for information and knowledge building, recognising its invaluable role in people's socio-economic development (see Castells et al., 2007; Donner, 2008). There is also a crucial strand of scholarship that emphasises the importance of the same technological infrastructure for people to fully participate in the pleasures of online socialities, which is becoming an increasingly important feature of our ever-more mediated lives (Arora, 2019).

Meanwhile, the scholarship on digital media and mediated relationships takes a micro approach to understand the diverse ways in which people experience access to these technologies. The works on mobile intimacies, in particular, reveal the complexity of how people use such technologies to build and transform their relationships, ranging from the romantic to the familial to the communal (see Dobson et al., 2018; Hjorth and Lim, 2012).

In this piece, we draw on both macro and micro perspectives to further build on the idea of 'glocal intimacies' (Cabañes and Uy-Tioco, 2020). This refers to how mobile technologies have both normalised and intensified the entanglement of people's relationships of closeness with the ever-shifting and constantly negotiated flows between global modernity and local everyday life. On one hand, glocal intimacies builds on Roland Robertson's (1994) notion of 'glocalisation', in that it emphasises 'the simultaneity and inter-penetration of what are conventionally called the global and the local – or in more general vein – the universal and the particular' (Robertson 1994: 38). It highlights how this dynamic of 'simultaneity' and 'inter-penetration' manifests in mobile-mediated relationships. On the other hand, the concept also seeks to nuance Robertson's thesis in the context of East/Southeast Asia more broadly and the Philippines specifically. It posits that what we define as local emerges from the region's negotiations with global forces, both from its colonial past and neo/postcolonial present. Applying this argument to the topic at hand, we take the digital relationships enacted by Filipinos to be borne out of the long history of pushing for universal access in the Philippines.

In line with the theme of this special issue, we look at the case of mobile intimacies in the Philippines. While the country is a developing Southeast Asian nation, Filipinos clock the most time spent on social media in the world, at an average of 4.12 hours per day (We Are Social, 2019). The Philippines has in fact been called 'text messaging capital of the world' and the 'social media capital of the world'. The ubiquity of mobile media in the everyday lives of Filipinos means that these technologies have become a significant feature of their intimate relationships.

This paper draws together existing data from the authors' different ethnographic projects about the mobile mediated intimacies of Filipinos from different social classes. All in all, these works span over a decade of research about the role of mobile media in their relationships, particularly regarding: cosmopolitan elite migrants navigating their many ties between the homeland and land of settlement; Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) seeking to maintain transnational family ties, and middle-class professionals in search of global and modern relationships. By looking at these data collectively and comparing classed experiences of access, we are able to take a broader view of the mobile media use of Filipinos. And by using glocal intimacies as a framework, we are able to generate new insights into the different ways that class shapes how people use

mobile media to navigate between the global and the local in their everyday relationships.

We contribute to the discussions about telecommunications as a public utility and public good to which citizens have the right by foregrounding the distinct case of the Philippines (Alampay, 2006; Mirandilla, 2007). The Philippines is unlike most postcolonial nations because rather than being historically state-owned, its telecom industry has always been in private hands since the time of American occupation (Cabanda and Ariff, 2002). Despite being a developing country, the Philippines has been seen as an early innovator in developing mobile phone products and services that expanded access to the middle class and the poor. These include the ability to electronically buy and share phone credits in small denominations, the development of mobile money payment systems, and the expansion of mobile-based financial services using the most basic mobile phone handsets (Mendes et al., 2007). The Philippines can serve as a springboard for thinking about the possibilities and pitfalls of trying to achieve universal access, including the top-down initiatives from telecom companies and bottom-up innovations from entrepreneurs on the ground.

We also deepen the literature on mobile intimacies by fleshing out the link between the kinds of mobile access that Filipinos have and their capacity to shape their relationships. Extant works about this topic do gesture towards such differentiated connections. Among many other things, they indicate that access to and know-how of mobile apps influence the texture of experience that individuals have of cosmopolitan romance (Lorenzana, 2019), transnational familyhood (Cabalquinto, 2020), and global solidarities (McKay, 2017). Through the lens of glocal intimacies, however, we make explicit the negotiation that happens at the heart of these experiences: between global modernity – as crystallised by people's contexts of access – and local everyday life – as exemplified by people's practices of mediated mobile intimacies.

Throughout this piece, we develop our argument about how greater access to mobile media means that one has more control in one's experience of glocal intimacies. In the case of the Philippines, however, what has emerged is a contradictory situation, wherein the quality of digital access of a certain group is inversely related to their dependence on this access in reconfiguring their local relationships as well as in enacting global ties.

Glocal intimacies: at the interface of digital access and everyday relationships

The concept of glocal intimacies emphasises that people's relationships of closeness are entangled in the negotiation of two forces: that of global modernity and of local everyday life. Importantly, we also argue that digital media normalise and intensify these entanglements. To flesh these out, we put into conversation two bodies of literature. First is on how the logic of global modernity figures in the

drive towards universal digital access. Second is on how people's everyday relationships are shaped by the increasing ubiquity but also persistent unevenness of digital media in their lives.

Digital access in the Philippines

The increasing ubiquity of digital media in the Philippines has paved the way for mediated glocal intimacies to be a more ubiquitous experience for Filipinos. But even if the country has been called the 'text messaging capital of the world' and the 'social media capital of the world', its overall digital infrastructure is still underdeveloped.

Like most developing countries, digital access in the Philippines is uneven and shaped by its colonial past. Colonisation by Spain for almost 400 years and the United States for another 40 years has profoundly shaped Philippine society politically, economically, and culturally. One of the paradoxes that characterises the Philippines is its rapid westernisation and acceptance of modern communications technologies, suggesting an open culture that readily adapts to prevailing conditions (Pertierra, 2003). Unlike other postcolonial nations who had state-owned telecom industries akin to those in Europe, the Philippines' telecom industry has been owned and controlled by the private sector since the era of American colonialism. Its first telecom company, the Philippine Long Distance Telephone Company (PLDT), was a monopoly protected by the Philippine government. This arrangement carried on from its founding in 1928 until the introduction of competition to the telecommunications market in 1992 (Cabanda and Ariff, 2002).

A crucial point in the history of digital access are the political economic shifts that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s that promoted neoliberal policies across the globe. McChesney (2008) points out that the communications industry has been most changed by capitalistic globalisation. Neoliberal ideas of free markets, strong property rights, and free trade became 'hegemonic as a mode of discourse . . . incorporated into the common-sense way many interpret, live in, and understand the world' (Harvey, 2005: 3). After years of martial law and dictatorship, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the promotion of political and economic reform in the Philippines aimed at achieving the status of 'newly industrialised country' (Intal, 1995). Specifically, policies of liberalisation, deregulation, and privatisation were implemented as part of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB). Nowhere is the Philippines' turn towards liberalisation and deregulation in telecom policy more pronounced than in its participation in the World Trade Organization (WTO). In 1994, the Philippines, alongside 69 other countries, signed the WTO Basic Telecommunications Agreement, which committed the signatories to liberalise basic telecom. The neoliberal reform movement marked the start of 'the third era in telecommunications policy' (Noll, 1999: 2) for developing countries such as the

Philippines. The first era had been characterised by ownership of telecom companies by colonial governments or large foreign companies, followed by the second era where these companies were nationalised (or, in the case of the Philippines, placed into the hands of a private monopoly closely allied with the state). The third era is, by contrast, fully intertwined with the global neoliberal policies emanating from western developed nations.

The deregulation of the Philippine telecom industry meant to encourage competition and provide universal access across the country. Indeed, the 1990s saw the proliferation of telecom companies that would encourage competition, provide consumers with choice, and introduce mobile telephony (Aldaba, 2000). However, market forces, neoliberal practices, and the wheels of capital led to mergers and acquisitions that have resulted in a virtual duopoly with PLDT (which owns Smart Communications) and Globe Telecom, Inc. as the dominant players, providing mobile and landline telephone services as well as Internet broadband. Like many developing countries, the Philippines is 'mobile first'— meaning the mobile phone is often the first digital medium people encounter or own. Hence, the widespread adoption of mobile phones has been consequential in altering the ways Filipinos live their everyday lives.

At first glance, it seems that digital access in the Philippines is universally available. The country's mobile phone penetration rate stands at 116.0%, while its Internet penetration rate is at 71.0% (We Are Social, 2019). However, a closer look reveals that access is uneven. The country's elites, as early adopters of mobile phones and the Internet, subscribe to monthly plans and purchase the newest technologies. It was only when prepaid phones were introduced in 1998 that the telecom market substantially opened up to those from lower income brackets. Currently, 96.0% of the mobile phones in the Philippines are prepaid (We Are Social, 2019), with users purchasing credits in small increments in order to make calls, send text messages, and access the Internet. Indeed, mobile phones, social media, and the Internet have become part of the everyday lives of Filipinos across all socio-economic sectors. But this is not without continuing challenges to connectivity. Although the elites are able to have full access to broadband connections, platforms, apps, and smartphones, they are still hampered by slow Internet speeds. The poor are consigned to 'good enough' access (Uy-Tioco, 2019) that is even more unreliable and dependent on what they can afford on a daily basis. While much improvements have been made to speed-up the Internet, more investment in infrastructure is needed for it to be at par with comparable Southeast Asian nations (DICT, 2017).

Uneven and unreliable access, notwithstanding, digital access, particularly through the mobile phone has transformed the everyday lives of many Filipinos. This is perhaps most evident in the maintenance and development of intimate social relationships across the country and around the globe.

Differentiated mobile intimacies of Filipinos

In the preceding section, we established the history and the kind of technological infrastructure that underpins how Filipinos experience mobile-mediated relationships. While elites are able to have full access and the poor are limited by 'good enough' access, these are still constrained by infrastructure limitations in the nation. Much of the extant literature on mobile mediated intimacies in the Philippines often only allude to this reality. Nevertheless, they have done much to flesh out the implications of such a ubiquitous but uneven digital media access on the relationships that Filipinos seek to foster online.

One strand of the abovementioned literature is about Filipinos' intimate relationships. These works underscore the crucial role that the quality of digital media access plays in how individuals negotiate the global and the local in the realm of romance. They reveal that access is a window into the economic infrastructure that underpins intimacy, altering, shaping or constituting experiences, practices and ideologies of people's relationships (Lorenzana, 2019).

A key example of this is that social media allow the youth in the Philippines to live out their desires for a 'modern love' characterised by 'globalised' perspectives and practices towards sexuality (Illouz, 2012), despite living in a country where the public discourse is predominated by conservative Catholicism (Cabañes, 2019; see also Labor, 2020). Twitter, for instance, has enabled young middle-class Filipinos to materialise public expressions of such a kind of modern love (Lorenzana, 2018). Through their deft use of hashtags, they are able to create 'ambient affiliation' (Zappavigna, 2011), that is, momentary and mediated bonds that afford them an escape from local expectations for heteronormative partnerships that lead to traditional marriage. Thus, they are able to feel a sense of belonging to the modern world of romance.

Another example is what happens to transnational married partners. For them, access creates 'power geometries' (Massey, 1994), in that the ability of partners to direct the flow of power that emerges from the technological compression of time and space comes to depend on how they are differently situated. In the case of migrant Filipino wives working in a developed country, being abroad tends to shift the balance of conjugal power towards her (Acedera and Yeoh, 2019). Not only does the migrant wife reside in a country with superior technological infrastructure, she also often takes on the role of the breadwinner selecting mobile devices and communications services for the family. Consequently, she can better strategically manage the temporalities of their marital life, asserting when she and her husband should be together through synchronous communication or be more remote and only use asynchronous communication.

A second strand of literature is about familial relationships, and especially about maintaining transnational families. What one can glean from these works is that

the quality of digital media access is central to the process of migrant parents and left-behind children domesticating mobile technologies, within which the dynamics of glocal intimacies are crystallised. Here, we see the emergence of 'asymmetrical communication' (Lim, 2016). This pertains to the entanglement of the different family members' attempts to deploy communication technologies for their personal purposes and of their family's shared ideals, practices, and values.

Often, it is the left-behind children who assert their connection to a globalised world. To challenge the communicative regimes set by migrant parents, young people who have access to a range of communication technologies will insist on using the platforms with which they are savviest (Madianou and Miller, 2013). In doing so, the children are able to enact, even if only tenuously, their desired relational distance with their parents. They might, for instance, use their superior familiarity with polymedia, shifting their conversations with their parents from one platform to another to calibrate the intimacy of their encounters. They might also maximise the affordances of different platforms, from suppressing the multimodality of a medium to limiting the visibility of their posts.

In contrast, parents in transnational families often seek to preserve a semblance of the dynamics of traditional Filipino familyhood (Acedera and Yeoh, 2019; see also San Pascual, 2019; Soriano et al., 2015). And for migrant parents, insisting on their parental authority is a crucial element of this familyhood. One way they attempt to do this is by controlling the very means of communication, choosing the platforms that better suit them rather than their children (Paragas, 2008). For instance, they might prefer expensive phone calls that they can afford over Internet communications in which the children are more familiar. Similar to their children, migrant parents also attempt to maximise the polymedia ecology they are in. They can do 'affective surveillance' by suddenly using a phone call to do a surprise check on where the children are (Cabalquinto, 2020).

A third and final strand of the literature looks at fostering community relationships. What emerges from these works is that the quality of digital access is central to the ability of individuals to translate into reality the 'aspirational geography of the online' (Arora and Scheiber, 2017; see also Soriano, 2019). Indeed, communication technologies generally and mobile technologies especially offer the possibilities of expanding people's networks from the local to the global, beyond the ordinary limits of their social capital.

For example, undocumented Filipino migrants use digital media in generating for themselves an 'archipelago of care' (McKay, 2016; see also Caguio and Lomboy, 2014; Paragas, 2006). While these migrants' lives might be characterised by precarity, communications technologies help them cement bonding networks that originate from an array of milieu, from social media groups to faith groups to community centres. These in turn, allow them to generate a sense of stability while continuing to face the challenges of their everyday lives. Filipino migrants who are relatively better off, meanwhile, use polymedia to foster a global network

of community support for their parenting (McKay, 2017). The communication that these platforms enable not only allow the migrant parents to display their commitment to their networks at home, but also allow those in the Philippines to display their contribution to the global project of transnational familyhood.

Methodology

As mentioned in the introduction, the cases we discuss in this article are from different ethnographic works that we conducted for over a decade. The case of cosmopolitan elite migrants navigating their ties between the homeland and land of settlement comes from 15 in-depth interviews with Filipinos in the Metropolitan Washington D.C. area (Uy-Tioco, 2017; Uy-Tioco and Cabalquinto, 2020). That of OFWs and doing family transnationally is based on two sets of data: one from 10 informal and open-ended interviews with Filipino migrant mothers in the east coast of the United States (Uy-Tioco, 2007) and one from home visits and life story interviews with 10 pairs of left-behind fathers and children in the Philippines capital of Manila (Cabañes and Acedera, 2012). Finally, that of middle-class professionals in search of global and modern relationships draws on life story interviews and dating app walkthroughs with 15 middle-class millennial Filipino women in Manila (Cabañes and Collantes, 2020).

The common thread that ties together how we gathered data across our projects is that we sought to situate people's media and communication practices in the broader context of their everyday lives (Gillespie, 2005). Equally important, the cases we foreground in this article are all concerned with Filipino experiences of transnational relationships. They also share an emphasis on the centrality of mobile media in these relationships. The value of bringing them together is that it opens up an avenue for us to reexamine the issue of classed access. While this was already present in the individual case studies, looking at the cases collectively allows us to draw broader insights about it.

Table 1. Case studies and their income clusters.

Case studies	Income cluster	Indicative range of monthly family incomes (for a family size of 5 members) (in 2017 prices)	Percentage of population
–	Poor	Less than PHP 9520	22%
–	Lower income (but not poor)	Between PHP 9520 to PHP 19,040	36%
Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs)	Lower middle income	Between PHP 19,040 to PHP 38,080	27%
	Middle income	Between PHP 38,080 to PHP 66,640	10%
'middle class' millennial Filipino women	Upper middle income	Between PHP 66,640 to PHP 114,240	3.6%
	Upper income (but not rich)	Between PHP 114,240 to PHP 190,400	1%
cosmopolitan elites	Rich	At least PHP 190,400	0.4%

Source. Adapted from Albert et al (2018).

Here we want to point out two things. First is that even if our cases are not representative of all Filipinos, they are emblematic of those who have experienced using mobile media in the context of transnational relationships. Thus, in our analysis, we make the heuristic move of matching these cases with key income clusters in the Philippines. For this, we referred to a recent paper from the Philippine Institute of Development Studies (PIDS), which divides Filipinos into clusters ranging from poor to lower income to various kinds of middle income to upper income to rich (Albert et al., 2018) (see Table 1). Using our existing data on their class position, we designate the cosmopolitan elite migrants as rich, the OFWs and their transnational families as lower middle income to middle income, and the 'middle class' millennial Filipino women as upper middle income to upper income. We then characterise the quality of digital media access that the different participants of the case studies have.

Second, this work contributes to addressing the call for ethnographic research of media audiences/users to move away from fixating only on ever-greater contextualisation (Livingstone, 2003). This is because we take a comparative approach to the data we have collected from the different projects mentioned above. This approach allows us to mitigate the 'space- and time-bound limitations on the generalisability of our [media] theories, assumptions, and propositions' (Blumler et al., 1992: 3). It enables us to generate broader patterns and insights about digital media access and mobile mediated relationships that cut across our case studies. Through our three distinct cases – elite migrants, OFWs, and middle class millennials – we are able to draw connections between their social intimacies vis-a-vis their access to digital technologies.

Social class, glocal intimacies, and the contradictions of digital access

This section draws on the literature on digital access in the Philippines and on differentiated mobile intimacies of Filipinos. Here, we articulate the links between the telecom infrastructure of the Philippines and the material contexts of the participants in our case studies, who represent a range of the country's income clusters. To do this, we examine their practices of accessing the digital vis-a-vis their practices of mediated social relationships. Through this, we characterise the interface from which emerge Filipinos' experiences of glocal intimacies, and particularly their ability to reconfigure local relationships and to enact global ties.

We argue that the kinds of glocal intimacies that Filipinos are able to enact are premised on a contradictory relationship between the Philippines telecom infrastructure and people's material contexts. To be sure, all the case study participants from across the different income clusters are constrained by the country's 'good enough' telecom infrastructure (Uy-Tioco, 2019). But not all of them experience this constraint in the same way. The contradictions in the situation of the Philippines lies in the inverse relationship between a certain group's quality of digital access and their dependence on this access to enact glocal intimacies.

Elites: the global is the local

Of the different income clusters, it is the upper income to the rich who have the greatest access to various new media and ICTs to maintain relationships among physically distant families and friends. This is certainly true for elite Filipinos. Although their access is still constrained by the Philippines' infrastructure, it is less consequential for their intimate relationships. Belonging to the country's top .4% (Albert et al., 2018), they own top brand devices such as Apple and Samsung and have access to broadband connections, as telecoms prioritise the Metropolitan Manila (henceforth, Metro Manila) area and homes in the city's gated communities (Fife, 2018). They live in what Madianou and Miller (2013) describe as rich polymedia environments, meaning they have access to a variety of platforms and technologies to facilitate interpersonal relationships. Because cost and accessibility are not central issues, their choice of a platform becomes based on the 'social and emotional consequences of choosing between those different media' (Madianou and Miller, 2013: 170).

Similarly, elite Filipinos who have migrated to the United States have full, reliable access to first-world high-speed connections and technologies. They did not leave the Philippines because of poverty or to escape economic or political situations. Rather, they are highly educated and usually work in white-collar jobs. Most of them arrived in the United States as graduate students, through work placements, or because of family members. Many have even higher cultural, social, and economic capital in the homeland due to their family backgrounds. They belong in both the homeland and the land of settlement – the Philippines and the United States. Home is two places, even when those two places are across the globe. These transnational migrants 'live in several societies simultaneously' (Glick-Schiller et al., 1992: 11).

The online lives of elite Filipinos clearly stand apart from those in the lower income clusters. As we discussed earlier, many of those in the lower socio-economic strata of the Philippines are familiar with the experience of uneven access creating 'power geometries' (Massey, 1994), 'asymmetrical communication' (Lim, 2016), and an 'aspirational geography of the online' (Arora and Scheiber, 2017). In contrast, global connections for elite Filipinos are part of their everyday. Ties with friends, family, news, and events from geographically distant places seamlessly weave in and out of everyday local and physical lives. The accessibility of digital platforms, apps, and devices to the elites mean that they can experience 'connected presence'. These are mediated relationships characterised by a continuous presence through 'irregular interaction', providing the 'feeling of a permanent connection' (Licoppe, 2004: 141) with each other. This is made possible with a mix of synchronous and asynchronous platforms to which elite Filipinos in both the United States and the Philippines have access, such as Skype, Zoom, Viber, and WhatsApp.

The rich polymedia access of elite Filipinos does not preclude being inconvenienced by the limitations of the telecom infrastructure in the Philippines. They still experience unstable Internet broadband access that lead to laggy mobile video and voice calls. However, because these elites lead highly mobile and cosmopolitan lives, these inconveniences are not too consequential. Apart from their ability to form mediated global and transnational connections, they are also more mobile in the literal sense – they are able to travel to other places overcoming the challenges of obtaining visas and costs. As such, their social intimacies are less dependent on technological mediation.

The experience of Marga, a 52-year-old mother of two college-aged children exemplifies how elites experience the friction between their full access to polymedia and the limitations of the Philippine infrastructure. Marga calls her parents through the messaging app Viber daily on her way to work in the east coast of the United States, while on the other side of the world in the Philippines, her parents would just be finishing dinner. These routine global conversations are not long and often about mundane things yet are part of her local everyday. Despite her reliable data plan in the United States, inevitably, conversations would get interrupted by the unreliable broadband service at her parents' home. But because of the daily routine, conversations could simply be picked-up either later in the day or in the next morning's call. Also, Marga, her parents, and siblings have their various family group chats, where they can continue to communicate asynchronously. Furthermore, Marga also regularly returns to the Philippines annually, spending weeks with family and friends. And in return, they would visit her in the United States as well. For elite Filipinos like Marga then, transnational familial intimacies are enriched by digital media. But because they are physically mobile and financially stable, relationships are less dependent on technological mediation. Clearly, elite Filipinos 'live their lives together across distance' (Baldassar and Merla, 2014), as everyday life is always connected to the global.

OFWs: the local persists in the global

In contrast to elite transnational Filipinos, OFWs and their left-behind families usually experience asymmetrical access to digital media. This is in line with the experience of 37% of the Philippines' population, who belong to the lower middle income to middle income clusters (Albert et al., 2018). Of the 2.2 million Filipinos working abroad under fixed contracts, 56% are women, many of whom leave children and husbands behind (PSA, 2020). While these migrant women have access to more reliable infrastructure and more advanced devices, their left-behind families are constrained by the telecom infrastructure in the Philippines. Furthermore, left-behind families' access to devices and platforms are dependent on the remittances migrants are able to send home. So even if OFWs are in another country, their lives are still shaped by the everyday realities in the Philippines.

Prepaid mobiles and top-up credits (locally called 'load') in small denominations opened the market to those with lower incomes, making ICTs 'less expensive, more widespread, and more closely integrated with the life of working-class people' (Qiu, 2009: 3). Examples of some of the cheapest prepaid services are Globe Telecom's GoSURF15 promo load that provides users with 100 MB of data and 30 MB for Instagram for only PhP15.00 (about 30 US cents) or Smart Communications' UCT30 plan that includes 100 MB of data, unlimited texts within the Smart/ PLDT network, and free Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp that is valid for 1 day for Php30.00 (about 60 US cents). Called 'promos' by the telecom companies, these prepaid plans are numerous and range from PhP10.00 to PhP2,500.00, valid from 1day to 30days. Beyond voice calls, text messaging, and data, these promos tend to include free access to a social media app, video or music streaming, or work-related app (e.g. Facebook, Spotify, Netflix, Zoom, or WhatsApp). Because they are called 'promos', these prepaid products and services could be changed or deleted depending on consumer data collected by the telecom.

All these mean that Filipinos from lower incomes must be adept at understanding these promos to determine what suits their needs. For many, this involves a daily review of one's needs and financial capacity vis-a-vis the products, services, and promotions offered by telecoms at the moment. This awareness of incremental costs of using mobile devices results in a 'metered mindset', where users 'do not browse and surf, they dip and sip, carefully conserving airtime and balances on their data bundles' (Donner, 2015: 135). Such financialisation of everyday life demonstrates the uneven access to digital media that facilitate social intimacies. Those who can afford to purchase weekly, biweekly, or monthly 'load' are able to have more continuous access, while those who have limited incomes are consigned to 'good enough' access that at times allow them to maintain social intimacies interspersed with times where access is simply not affordable.

Take the case of two migrant women. First is Vicky, a 45-year-old caregiver in the USA and her 48-year-old left-behind husband, Fred, who is a family driver in the Philippines. Second is Juliet, a 42-year-old nanny in the USA and her 17-year-old daughter and 20-year-old son in the Philippines. Their experiences are illustrative of the kind of uneven access experienced by OFWs and, importantly, the resultant 'power geometries' (Massey, 1994) and 'asymmetrical communication' (Lim, 2016) such an access brings. Because both Vicky and Juliet have become the breadwinners in the family, they have also managed to possess greater control of their mobile mediated communication. But while they value taking on a traditionally masculine role, they still have to do the double-burden of making sure that the household finances are in order. For Vicky, this means that in voice calls with her husband Fred, she would demand a complete accounting of all the family's expenses. Fred laments this fact and dreads the conversations when he has to recite where his wife's remittances have been spent. Meanwhile, Juliet relies more on text messaging than phone calls when discussing household spending and monitoring her children's activities. This way,

she can immediately send her messages as soon as she thinks of a concern about her children's lives back home. However, her children sometimes do not immediately reply, saying they have run out of 'load'. This leads to tensions since Juliet expects that they make sure they always have 'load' on their mobile phones, particularly because she sends them her hard earned dollars. Although they live global lives then, these migrant women continue to be oriented to the local lives of their families in the Philippines.

Middle class: the local aspires to the global

The digital access of 'middle class' Filipinos lies somewhere in between that of the transnational elite Filipinos and OFWs. Theirs is a common experience among the 4.6% who constitute the Philippines' upper middle income to upper income clusters (Albert et al., 2018). On one hand, their communicative environment can also be characterised as fully polymedia. Although they do not possess the same economic capital as the elites, they still have enough to purchase the latest mobile technologies and subscribe to higher-end fixed postpaid mobile plans. Emblematic of these services is Globe Telecoms' 'The Plan' series. The monthly subscriptions in this series range from PhP599.00 (USD12.33) to PhP7999.00 (USD164.65). They include a monthly data allocation from 3 GB for the cheapest plans to unlimited for the most expensive plans. And they also include other features such as unlimited calls to other Globe and Touch Mobile numbers, unlimited texts to all networks, 100 mins of calls to all networks, and 1 GB free Facebook access. The top of the line plans have additional features that promise an aspirational lifestyle: free roaming data, loyalty rewards points, and access to Globe's Platinum Relationship Manager, Priority Network, as well as 'Thea' the Platinum digital assistant.

On the other hand, the practices that 'middle class' Filipinos have surrounding mobile media access do not always mirror that of the elites. While they can afford the newest devices and the fanciest mobile plans, they tend to be more discerning about whether to actually get the latest devices or the fanciest postpaid mobile plans. Because the middle class are keen to maximise their income – which is still significantly less than the elites – they are often strategic in their choices. This is especially true for those who live in Metro Manila, where many lifestyle establishments are increasingly fashioning themselves as wifi hotspots for their data-hungry consumers (see Marek, 2020). In this context, some would question the value of getting postpaid plans when they can rely on a mix of prepaid credits and free wifi hotspots. Others might nevertheless still go for such plans because of the high-quality smartphones that come with them.

As a consequence of these dynamics, the digital access that the Filipino 'middle class' have ends up being 'aspirational' (see Arora and Scheiber, 2017). For many of them, an elite level of access is attainable, but not always sustainable. Running parallel to this is their experience of glocal intimacies. For instance, the availability of an elite kind of rich polymedia environment to the millennial Filipino

women in our case study enables them to aspire to more globalised intimacies by enacting 'digital flyovers' (Cabañes and Collantes, 2020). Through their dating apps and other mobile media, they feel that they can lift themselves above the local dating scene of Manila and be readily connected to a more cosmopolitan dating scene that features the city's non-Filipino men. But at the same time, these women's experiences of mediated transnational relationships would be slightly more similar to OFWs. Although they can afford to travel abroad from time to time to connect with romantic potentials or partners, they would need to save up and sacrifice some of the luxuries of their so-called 'middle class' life to make this possible. In the meantime, they are subjected to the underdeveloped telecom structure of the Philippines.

An exemplar of an aspirational kind of mobile mediated glocal intimacy is Fatima, a 31-year-old strategic planner. She says that dating apps such as Bumble have allowed her to enjoy many sexual exploits with Western men, which started during her stint as an exchange student in Toronto, Canada. Through her intimate knowledge of Bumble and the photo sharing app Instagram, she has become savvy at making herself attractive to the kind of Western men that she wants. Fatima says that she uses her Bumble profile to signal the lifestyle preferences she wants of herself and her potentials. Meanwhile, she uses her Instagram account to show that apart from being 'hot', she also lives a cosmopolitan life characterised by good food, cultural pursuits, and world travels. But when Fatima recently found an American man with whom she wanted to settle down, she realised that sustaining a long-distance relationship was not so easy. To be able to spend quality time with each other, they would have to spend many months saving up money for their airfare and accumulating vacation leaves for a decent visiting time. In between their meetups – which usually lasted only for a bittersweet 2 weeks at a time – they had to make do with text chats and video calls for many months. And for these long stretches, they would have to intermittently deal with the frustrations of dropped calls, garbled audio, and laggy video that characterise the quality of mobile communication in the Philippines. So, while the lives of women like Fatima are firmly oriented to the global, the cosmopolitan life often remains aspirational.

Conclusion

In this article, we expounded on the link between the uneven mobile media access in the Philippines and the social intimacies experienced by Filipinos across different income clusters. Using the concept of glocal intimacies (Cabañes and Uy-Tioco, 2020), we brought to the fore how the telecom infrastructure in the country plays a role in the way people reconfigure local ties and enact global relationships.

Drawing on our case studies, we demonstrated that the way Filipinos enact glocal intimacies is premised on a contradictory relationship between the Philippines telecom infrastructure and people's material contexts. For elite,

cosmopolitan Filipinos, access to rich polymedia environments serves to accentuate how their everyday life is already firmly linked to the global. So even if they are not insulated from the inconveniences of the unreliable telecom infrastructure in the Philippines, their intimate relationships continue to flourish as their already-mobile lives means they are less dependent on mobile media connections. Despite the limitations of OFWs' access, mobile technologies still provide them a lifeline to their left-behind families. Because of this continued connection, their daily lives abroad are still oriented towards their families back home. Yet this connection is uneven and dependent on what is made available to them by the limitations of 'good enough' access of prepaid mobile phone plans. For 'middle class' Filipinos, rich polymedia access is attainable, although they are more mindful of the costs of the highest end mobile devices and services. This allows them to enter into long-distance relationships that are global. However, the material realities of their 'middle class' lives – from having to save up money and vacation leaves – means that their aspirations for cosmopolitan intimacies are made challenging by the Philippines' underdeveloped telecom infrastructure.

Clearly, the glocal intimacies experienced by Filipinos are constrained by the products and services provided by Smart Communications and Globe Telecom. This is because the access provided by the virtual duopoly that dominates Philippines telecom amplifies existing socio-economic divides in the country. While those in the higher income clusters are provided access to broadband connections and top-end devices, the rest of the country's access is constrained by limitations of prepaid and lower-end devices. It remains to be seen whether and how we can achieve universal access in the current private sector led telecoms setup.

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