Research Article

Mobile Phones and Gender Empowerment: Negotiating the Essentialist–Aspirational Dialectic

Hoan Nguyen
Arul Chib

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Ramaswami Mahalingam

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA

Abstract

The capability approach has been criticized as individualistic, being reframed in alignment with dominant social structures. We situate individual agency within the frame of power structures, examining empowerment gained from mobile phone use by Vietnamese foreign brides [n = 33] in Singapore. Applying an intersectionality perspective suggested that, while facing discrimination in multiple ways, these migrant women negotiated two strategies for empowerment at the intersection of gender, class, and ethnicity: (1) essentialization of gender and (2) aspiration for autonomy and equality. Mobile phones were found to be active agents in facilitating respondents' aspirations for individual transformation, autonomy, and more powerful decision-making roles. On the other hand, mobiles mediated the enactment of their essentialist beliefs of femininity and gender roles, in contrast with the dominant development discourse of women's empowerment. Sociocultural contexts influencing processes of technological appropriation are discussed, reframing prevailing notions of gender equality within the essentialist–aspirational framework.

Introduction

Over the past decade, Sen's capability framework (1980, 1999) has been widely applied in examinations of various impacts of information and communication technologies for development (ICTD). Sen (1980) defines *agency* as one's freedom to pursue one's own interests, to make choices, and to lead the life one values. However, the capability approach has been typically criticized for its overly individualistic approach (Thapa, Sein, & Sæbø, 2012), in alignment with the dominant social structure (Thompson, 2004). Further, it has been reframed in terms of social exclusion (Sen, 2000; Zheng & Walsham, 2008) and constraints on agency. Peter (2003) emphasizes situated agency in order to consider the motivations by and constraints under which an individual acts. He argues that situated contexts, contingencies, and individual circumstances shape and restrict negotiations of agency, with marginalized individuals exhibiting "what may, in terms of manifest behavior, seem like submission, may hide more subtle strategies of resistance" (Peter, 2003, p. 27).

This article elaborates on the frame of restricted agency to investigate the relationship between mobile phone use and women's empowerment among a group of marginalized migrants, Vietnamese foreign brides in Singapore.[1] Here, the mobile phone does not merely denote the material object used, it also embodies the assemblage of technical components it possesses, information and communication elements it affords, and sociocultural processes it mediates. We raise these questions: What strategies of empowerment do Vietnamese brides develop in their specific life contexts? What forms of agency do they gain? How do they negotiate

agency through mobile phones? To answer these questions we use an intersectionality lens as a guiding theoretical frame to understand lived experiences of the marginalized women simultaneously shaped by multiple identities and social positions of gender, ethnicity, social class, and migrant status. We argue that, while facing multiple aspects of marginalization within the dominant patriarchal power structures, women not only negotiate their mobile phone use to achieve autonomy and equality, but simultaneously commit themselves to hierarchical gender relations that regulate their overt enactment of agency.

Women's Empowerment, Agency, and Development

Women's empowerment has been considered a key development goal; however, pathways to achievement are less obvious as the measurement of empowerment has remained unclear or has varied by sociocultural contexts (Kabeer, 1999). Women's empowerment was largely viewed from an economic stance, where "wellbeing freedom" concerning individuals' instrumental gain and tangible development outcomes, such as income growth, access to education, healthcare and labor market participation were emphasized, while "agency freedom" (Sen, 1999) received relatively less attention. Most approaches advocated Western notions of *gender equality,* defined as the enhancement of women's rights to reach parity with men in all spheres of society (Hafkin & Huyer, 2007). Accordingly, the focus of many ICTD projects was to transform women in the developing world into economically productive and autonomous actors (Asiedu, 2012).

Less attention has been paid to the contextualized nature of gender empowerment and the underlying sociostructural elements. While some scholars (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Kleine, 2011) deliberately incorporate social structures as components in innovative frameworks of agency, these approaches can still be considered Senian, given that the choices are still defined as development outcomes. Our question concerns what if, in a particular circumstance or within a certain social structure, one has limited or no choices to select from? In this regard, "situated agency" (Peter, 2003), "adaptive preferences" (Elster, 1983), and "dialectic negotiations" (Chib & Chen, 2011) emerge as explanatory frameworks for power negotiation processes, rather than straightforward commentaries on empowerment gain. When faced with limited options, a person can make a choice wherein she (un)consciously downgrades and reframes her desires in light of what she cannot access (Elster, 1983) and strategically negotiates the concrete constraints on gaining empowerment. Nevertheless, such enactment amid negotiations of sociopersonal constraints risks reproducing social norms and (unequal) power relations (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Roles of the Mobile Phone

A substantial body of literature has affirmed the instrumental impacts of mobile phones on women's lives. Recent research has discussed the intangible outcomes that women have achieved through mobile adoption, for instance, improved psychological wellbeing (Smith, Spence, & Rashid, 2011), a sense of mattering to others (Chew, Ilavarasan, & Levy, 2015), and even redefining traditional gender roles (Garrido & Roman, 2006). However, empowerment is still by and large viewed from a socioeconomic perspective. The overall picture suggests that mainstream ICTD research still aligns with the Western notion of women's empowerment, placing considerable focus on the role of ICTs in transforming traditional gender roles. Remarkably, mobile phones are considered a "great equalizer" (Druker, 2001), agency is seen as freedom, and equality is the ultimate goal for female agents. We argue that an overemphasis on economic outcomes and the dominant Western discourse of development lead to the unexamined belief that economic growth alone is equal to individuals' choice, which circumscribes human experiences within a static development frame. Such a perspective fails to closely examine women's experiences as daily lived conditions within constrained social structures. Doing so would provide insights into the situated nature of choice and agency, and contribute to problematizing the discussion of what, exactly, constitutes development in relation to technology access, use, and appropriation.

Technology is more than simply hardware; rather, it is a site of knowledge production, information gathering, cultural representation, and power relations (Plant, 1998). Hence, scholars attending to social aspects of technology have talked about gender (in)equality issues as they are associated with women's mobile phone access and use. Mobile phones are seen to simultaneously, and paradoxically, relate to disempowerment outcomes, leading to inequitable redistribution of resources along gender lines, thus exacerbating existing inequity in gender relations (Ling & Horst, 2011). Patriarchal control in hierarchical societies prohibits women's

access to mobile phones (Tenhunen, 2008). Domestic roles can restrict dependent wives' mobile phone use within the household (Handapangoda & Kumara, 2013), while migrant workers negotiate motherhood identities under pressure from their left-behind families via mobile communication (Chib, Malik, Aricat, & Kadir, 2014).

There have been calls for ICTD research to be undertaken with a bottom-up approach to investigate women's inner voices (Choudhury, 2009) and to align personal agency with the sociocultural structure (Andersson, Grönlund, & Wicander, 2012). Tacchi and Chandola (2015) show that women's imaginations, aspirations, and agencies are tied to their sociocultural, political, and gendered positions, suggesting the need to investigate the dynamics of social hierarchies and the complexities of women's experiences. Masika and Bailur (2015) demonstrate that taking note of dominant social structures in women's ICT use could reveal (unequal) gender relations that are superficially perpetuated through women's negotiations of agency.

Our article situates *development* as the enhancement of women's agency, focusing on restricted agency established through strategies for empowerment negotiated by women. We argue that at certain junctures in women's lives, (unequal) power relations do not appear either merely superficially and temporarily or as a constant immovable structure, but are manifest strategically by the female agents in their negotiations of agency and autonomy. Further, we affirm that gender empowerment is complicated by the dynamics of social structures and by women's multiple locations at various social categories alongside gender, such as race and class. To understand the interwoven dynamics of agency and social constructs, we propose intersectionality as a guiding theoretical framework.

Intersectionality as a Perspective and a Theoretical Framework

The theory of complex co-constituted differences under the rubric of intersectionality has traditionally not only been a normative-theoretical argument, but a research paradigm (Hancock, 2007). To illustrate the concept, Crenshaw (1989) used the metaphor of intersecting roads to refer to multiple categories of discrimination experienced by women of color. She argues that a single-axis framework focusing on either sex or race is insufficient to consider how marginalized women are vulnerable to both mutually constituted grounds of race and sex. Mahalingam and Leu (2005) view *intersectionality* as "the triangulation of a subject vis-á-vis her location and social positioning along class, gender, race, or caste" (p. 841) in discussing the dynamic, multidimensional, and historically contingent nature of women's experiences. This definition provides a unique lens through which to situate the lived experiences of marginalized migrant women and makes multilayered power relations central to the process.

We draw on intersectionality to understand the multifaceted voices of Vietnamese brides, concentrating specifically on illuminating the dynamic processes in the negotiation of agency. Touching on complex gender experiences, the study aims to inform sociopsychological effects mediated by mobiles, from which hitherto hidden development outcomes might emerge. Our study focuses on the following research questions: What are the intersections of marginalization that Vietnamese brides in Singapore face? What empowerment strategies do Vietnamese brides develop in response to challenging sociostructural conditions? How do they negotiate (restricted) agency through the use of mobile phones?

Investigating migrant women's lived experiences in Singapore involves some critical development issues. These foreign brides are deemed to be of a low social class, which is determined mainly by relative income, education, and occupation (Lynch & Kaplan, 2000) as well as their ethnic minority status in the host society. Migrating from modest, often rural, circumstances in Vietnam, these women come to Singapore through marriages arranged by commercial match-making agencies or via friends and, in the process, acquire (or are acquired by) blue-collar Singaporean husbands with low salaries. The women's primary objective is to improve their economic prospects versus their prospects at home, acquire a middle-class status in Singapore, and potentially, attain equality within the social structure. However, the reality in Singapore is often starkly different from their expectations.

Singapore is an economic marvel, vying for the title of most advanced ICT ecosystem on the planet. However, Vietnamese brides face employment restrictions, descend into an economic dependency, and must conform to hierarchical gender norms embedded in a patriarchal social structure. Most Vietnamese brides take

low-paying jobs that correspond to their limited educational attainment such as waitresses, shop assistants, or hotel janitors, or they assume domestic responsibilities in the home. It is argued that the instrumental relationship between low income and low capabilities is affected by individual, social, and environmental diversities (Sen, 1980), such that a relatively poor person in a rich country can be more deprived in terms of capabilities compared to one with a lower absolute income, but living in a less wealthy nation (Qureshi, 2015; Sen, 1999). The precarious position of these women at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder is compounded by their position at the intersection of minority ethnicity and migrant status in Singapore's rising populist and nativist environment (Ramsay & Pang, 2015). We therefore note the importance of examining the lives of marginalized groups in developed countries alongside the associated meanings of development in technologically rich environments.

These migrants reveal important issues related to gender and inclusion. For the growing number of Southeast Asian foreign brides in the island-state, patriarchal control is a function of the transnational context (Jongwilaiwan & Thompson, 2013). These transnational women, migrating from a developing country to a developed country, are affected by at least two systems of beliefs and social norms: the traditional patriarchal gender conventions of Vietnam (Schuler et al., 2006) and the gender norms in Singapore. Singaporean society, while projecting an image as an economic miracle, features essential elements of patriarchal ideologies as a key organizing principle of its social structure (Tan, 2001), with women often in subordinate positions in relation to men (Chan, 2000). Hence, examining ICT experiences of Vietnamese brides requires consideration of the social context and the brides' intersectional position within it. We interrogate the women's experiences primarily at the intersections of gender, ethnicity, class, and migrant status, revealing relevant findings and implications specifically important to this position.

Methodology

Participants
Vietnamese women who migrated to Singapore exclusively through marriage to a Singaporean man were recruited as study participants (n = 33). Respondent demographics are illustrated in Table 1. Other criteria such as the period of residence in Singapore and legal status were not bounded in order to discover the diversity of their experiences in the foreign land. Fieldwork was conducted in Singapore from March–November 2015, with follow-up from February–June 2016.

Contact with the Vietnamese community in Singapore was established through the researchers' social network and participation in sociocultural events organized by Vietnamese communities in Singapore. Convenience snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. Assistance was sought from social organizations in Singapore since the group of Vietnamese brides maintains a low public profile within an increasingly politically sensitive environment for immigrants. We worked with the Vietnamese Embassy, which frequently organizes cultural events, and the Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants & Itinerant People, which provides counseling services and skill-learning classes. The trust thus established, along with associated positive references, resulted in more respondents opting into the study.

Data Collection and Analysis
To understand human lived experiences, qualitative in-depth interviews were augmented by the ethnographic approaches of participant observation and researcher participation. The principal interviewing themes included: (1) descriptions of lived experiences and personal relationships, (2) representations of social identities in terms of gender, ethnicity, social class, and immigration experiences, and (3) ICT usage patterns and empowerment outcomes. The majority (30/33) of the respondent interviews, lasting 45–60 minutes each, were conducted in Vietnamese, interspersed with an uneven English delivery. Grammatical errors have been retained in respondent quotations to reproduce natural expression.

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, then translated into English for analytical purposes. The transcripts were coded according to individual themes that related to the research questions. Emergent themes were coded into new categories to reflect important or interesting findings. The resultant

Table 1. Respondent Demographics.

Demographics		Number
Age group	20–30	4
	31–40	24
	41–50	5
Residential status	Long-term visitor's pass	24
	Permanent resident	9
	Singapore citizen	0
Income/month (US$1 = US$0.75)	0 (domestic work)	8
	1–1,000	8
	1,001–2,000	9
	2,001–3,000	4
	3,001–4,000	4
Highest qualification	Junior high school	14
	Senior high school	13
	College/university	6

output was combined and analyzed, with micro to macro units synthesized in response to the research questions (Slater, 1998).

We used an ethnographic methodology in order to engage in depth with the community over the course of more than a year altogether. While interviewing was an important method for probing respondents' thoughts and social relationships, the ethnographic method was vital for understanding respondents' experiences, life conditions, and behaviors. Ethnographic approaches included participant observation via home and workplace visits, bolstered by researcher participation in sociocultural events attended and/or organized by the respondents. Virtual ethnography complemented the physical fieldwork to facilitate our understanding of their online activities. The virtual ethnography was carried out via participation in respondents' social media group pages and online chat groups on mobile apps.

We regard reflexivity (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009) as an important component of our research. The lead author is a female Vietnamese migrant to Singapore. The coauthors are similarly transnational migrants. While the multicultural composition of the research team was deemed an advantage in collecting and interpreting quality data (Asiedu, 2012), we acknowledge the differential class, economic, and educational backgrounds that might introduce bias. The realization and accompanying reflection helped us discern our respondents' inner voices, aspirations, and struggles and to be able to listen in necessary silence as their stories unfolded. Perhaps, it is imperative that we, harnessing our relative (scientific) privilege, provide a voice to these hitherto-silent members of our society.

Findings

Marginalized Migrant Women at the Intersection of Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Class

We discovered that multiple differentiators in terms of gender, ethnicity, and social class were mutually constituted in the lives of the Vietnamese brides, with various forms of discrimination evident in personal and social domains. First, constraints related to their gender identity restricted respondents' personal opportunities and professional mobility. On the one hand, originating from conservative backgrounds in Vietnam, the women aligned themselves with the traditional gender roles available on arrival. On the other hand, assumption of identity was not entirely their choice; they were usually expected to be homemakers by their Singaporean family. This finding supports earlier research which found that Singaporean husbands, mostly Chinese-speaking blue-collar workers with low levels of education, sought foreign mates willing to uphold traditional gender values (Yeoh, Leng, & Dung, 2013). Consequently, many respondents succumbed to a domestic identity rather than seeking a career in a professional sphere.

> I want to go to work, but my husband isn't happy about that. He said, "Who will take care of the family and cooking? Who will teach our little child?" So I need to stay at home to take care of my son and teach him to do writing and counting. (Respondent 25)

Second, compounded by low income and limited education, the women experienced social discrimination because of their minority migrant position, confronted with the prevailing social stereotypes of their gendered ethnicity. Several respondents reported that the host population, including their in-laws, explicitly distinguished between "native" and "foreigner" and between "Singaporean" and "Vietnamese," making unmistakable the distance between the ethnicity of privilege and marginalization. This "othering" was exacerbated by existing stereotypes related to foreign sex workers from Vietnam (although sex work is legal in Singapore, it is often practiced illegally, and both avenues are frowned on), leading to social stigma being cast on the respondents. The history of Vietnamese women coming to the island state to engage in sex work caused prejudice toward these Vietnamese brides.

> No denying that some Vietnamese women come to this country to work as prostitutes. I don't want to criticize them because each person has her own destiny and situation. But a small worm can spoil the whole soup since such "bad reputation" can negatively affect us foreign brides here in Singapore. (Respondent 11)

This vulnerable social position was amplified by governmental policies that based a respondent's residential status on the stability and harmony of her relationship with her Singaporean husband: "It's worse that without PR [Permanent Residence—a legal status], when we have any problems with husbands, like divorce, we're forced to go back to the home country, meaning that we lose everything" (Respondent 13). It is important to note that despite their marital status with Singaporean men, not a single respondent had yet gained citizenship. The institutional discrimination through government regulation made the respondents more vulnerable in a family situation because financial dependence on husbands resulted in an expectation that their wives would uphold traditional gender norms, although they might have qualified for outside professional work.

While facing multiple forms of discrimination by the dominant group, we found that these Vietnamese brides constantly negotiated agency at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, social class, and migrant status. This struggle culminated in two strategies developed in response to their marginalized status: essentialization and aspiration. *Essentialism* of womanhood refers to the respondents' fundamental beliefs about traditional gender roles, with an accompanying idealization of their self-image as superior wives and/or mothers with an innate talent for running the household. Prior research (Mahalingam & Leu, 2005) revealed that for immigrant women, essentialism serves as a mechanism to negate the dominant representations of the "other." As a consequence of the discrimination associated with their own moral values ascribed by Singaporeans, these vulnerable Vietnamese women felt the need to uphold a moral image, going so far as to idealize a submissive nature.

> My husband said that he and his friends especially like to get married to Vietnamese ladies, partly because, unlike local women, we're very good at taking care of the family, especially people from my place, Hue. We're feminine, submissive, and take good care for the family. (Respondent 19)

Simultaneously, we found that Vietnamese brides' *aspiration* for autonomy and equality arose from their admiration of Singaporean women, often portrayed as role models in terms of educational attainment, professional identities, and financial independence.

> I admire them local women. They earn money well, know how to drive cars, and be very equal to men. Woman should do the things that they are good at. Going outside and working helps me to learn more things and know more people. (Respondent 8)

These seemingly paradoxical notions of gender characterize how Vietnamese immigrant women make sense of their transnational identities. The contradictory empowerment strategies—an essentialist nature of femininity and the aspiration for gender equality—can be seen as a dialectic struggle between personal agency and the social structure. Within this complex and challenging social environment, mobile phones were found to be active agents that mediated the enactment of these two strategies for empowerment.

The Mobile Phone and Aspiration

At the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and social class, these Vietnamese female migrants viewed their mobile phones as aspirational (i.e., using them for activities involving self-enhancement in learning and employment). Restrictive governmental policies, social constraints, and familial expectations of domesticity limited their ability to enhance their educational skills or to pursue gainful employment. Vietnamese brides, in response to these external constraints, enacted aspirational strategies by engaging in learning activities and establishing entrepreneurial businesses, mediated by mobile technologies. These strategies allowed the women to acquire a professional identity and a sense of financial independence, yet retain and perform their domestic responsibilities.

Mobiles were conspicuous as indispensable devices for information and communication, especially because they were accessible, affordable, and pragmatic for meeting the women's daily needs. Many respondents could not afford or lacked the skills to use other ICT devices such as personal computers, laptops, or tablets. The vast majority (32 of 33 brides) possessed a smartphone with Internet access. Many bought an affordable 3G/4G data plan, whereas some mainly accessed the Internet via wi-fi networks in the home. While some respondents actively explored their mobiles' affordances for learning and income generation, others were unaware of the benefits or possessed limited skills to proactively harness those benefits.

1. Learning

Upon arriving in a foreign land, and faced with myriad uncertainties about cultural norms that were exacerbated by a lack of Mandarin Chinese language skills, there was a critical need among the Vietnamese brides to improve their capabilities through learning the language. All respondents reported difficulties in communicating with Singaporeans due to language barriers. A common practice was to harness mobile phone features and applications to learn local languages, particularly English and Chinese. Instant helpers for these housebound wives were dictionary-based programs resident on their mobile devices. Google Translate was an indispensable tool for English–Vietnamese translation to help with comprehension and effective communication in daily contexts (e.g., message friends, read the news, seek entertainment). In this sense the mobile phone eased their learning curve; more importantly, it offered independence and autonomy in their constrained circumstances.

> I often use this dictionary on my phone. When I do not know an English word, I type out the word to this bar, so I can see the meaning in Vietnamese, and vice versa. So it's kind of helpful, especially when there is no one beside me. (Respondent 22)

Among those with more advanced technological skills, programs and websites that taught English were invaluable.

> I go to Internet to learn English. I download materials and save on phone. I open Google, type out keywords like "English for beginners," "Daily conversational English," "basic English," and so on, so I can see lots of websites suggested. (Respondent 25)

Despite the difficulties of acquiring language skills by themselves from home, the mobile phone engendered a sense of autonomy. It was vital in situations in which financial constraints and domestic responsibilities hindered their opportunities to attend an educational institution. Certain informal learning channels, such as YouTube videos with English lessons, proved useful.

> I think that watching YouTube is not the best way to learn languages. . . . Anyhow, it's helpful especially when there is no one around me and when I cannot go to school. (Respondent 22)

Besides learning languages, the women professed a desire to learn more about local norms, particularly regarding legal matters, to protect their rights and to gain a sense of security in their transnational marriages. A common practice was to read online about matters related to their marriage, such as the husband's sponsorship of their wives' residence in Singapore and child-raising rights in case of marital discord.

> When I just arrived, knowledge about legal issues, especially those related to my marriage, was very important. I went online, especially to visit some Facebook pages for Vietnamese foreign brides in Singapore to read up or post questions. (Respondent 16)

We note that the learning strategies were related to technological proficiency, and thus were exhibited differentially. As mobile-based learning is self-initiated, those unaware of the benefits offered by their smartphones or those with less education or fewer technical skills were forced to depend on others. Notably, middle-aged respondents reached out to friends on social platforms to develop learning skills.

> I am not good at using the Internet and websites. When I do my cleaning work at the hotel and I don't understand instructions posted, I go to WeChat and message my close friend, like, "Hey sister, what does this mean?" and she replied me, "That means they tell you to remember to turn off the light when you finish the work." (Respondent 29)

2. Employment

The mobile phone was a vital asset for the few Vietnamese brides who had paid employment. They were able to harness their mobile phones for self-employment activities and to aid in job-related decision making. Mobile phones facilitated business connections with clients, boosted work efficiency, helped acquire contemporary job skills, and provided a referral forum.

> I often Google new nails designs for each season, or learn on YouTube. . . . Customers often call to appoint a particular timing before coming to my salon. They also may want to comment on my posts on the salon Facebook page. (Respondent 24)

Many respondents had established self-employment activities online with considerable assistance from the resources on their mobile phone. Seven respondents (approximately one fifth) reported conducting home-based businesses, particularly online sales of clothing or Vietnamese foods, transnational money transfer services, and intermediary services for job placement. A smartphone with an Internet connection became an indispensable tool for these home-based activities conducted online. A wide range of mobile resources, which typically included free chat apps and Facebook personal pages, were used to facilitate business transactions. These entrepreneurial ventures became important opportunities for less-educated and low-literacy respondents to upgrade their skillsets, from basic language skills to advanced business advertising.

> When starting this cosmetic self-business, I had to learn how to type in Vietnamese on online platforms to advertise to Vietnamese customers. Now I know many online tricks and tools for my business. Sometimes I use my photos and make videos of myself wearing new clothing arrival, using online video makers and apps to create videos as promotional advertisements. (Respondent 17)

These entrepreneurial activities led Vietnamese brides to create a professional identity, which not only helped develop self-confidence, but also earned them respect beyond the household. For instance, the entrepreneurial businesses mediated by mobiles offered respondents the opportunity to remotely teach their clients digital skills, thereby boosting the self-esteem of the Vietnamese brides.

> My customers are often living abroad, and some of them do not know how to use apps as WhatsApp, Zalo, or Viber to send photos of their passports for me to process and help them find a job. I've got familiar with the situation. Now I always spend time to teach the people carefully about how to use the apps. (Respondent 5)

Moreover, due to the enhanced income opportunities and respect gained within the family, the women could assume greater decision-making roles within the household beyond their domestic responsibilities. It is worth nothing that these domestic roles remained central to their lives, with the identity of an entrepreneurial businesswoman scaffolded onto the identity of homemaker.

> Now I can be a good earner, create a business for myself at home. I can use my own hands to work and feed my family. Think about others marrying to a foreign man, the man sponsors her and works to feed her, and the husbands' family-in-law can cover everything for her, but me—I'm married to a foreign guy and feed him instead. I'm proud of that. (Respondent 17)

Here we see mobiles offering empowerment in gender equality that the women aspired and worked to achieve. Empowerment came in the form of increased income, enhanced capabilities, and greater resilience, leading in turn to expanded roles in both the domestic and social spheres. However, we caution that nuance is

required to evaluate the extent to which mobiles enhance female empowerment, and the actual form of agency these marginalized migrants actually negotiate. Examining these mobile experiences more deeply, we found that respondents harnessed a limited number of mobile resources, mainly in the Vietnamese language, and developed social–professional networks consisting almost exclusively of other Vietnamese brides in Singapore. Using a mobile phone to search for a job was thus a passive activity, as many of the women were reliant on information obtained from their narrow social networks.

> I do not know a lot about these [job websites] actually. So usually when people post about like "looking for shop assistant," "recruitment," "job openings" on Facebook, I click the post to read up. (Respondent 22)

We note the gendered nature of this activity, contrasting this with blue-collar South Asian male migrants to Singapore, who engage in a "bounded cosmopolitanism" (Chib & Aricat, 2016), or the ability to embrace professional enhancement and intercultural relationships in the workplace, amplified by mobile phones. By contrast, the entrepreneurial activities and social interactions of the Vietnamese brides were largely homebound, gendered, and usually specific to other Vietnamese brides, thus providing few opportunities to engage with the broader Singapore society. The agency thus arrived at via the technology hardly offered unlimited choice, but in fact occurred within a limited mobile space. Arguably, these bounded interactions could intensify the brides' existing social isolation from Singaporean society, with fewer opportunities to socialize outside the household.

The Mobile Phone and Essentialism

While fulfilling aspirations for autonomy and equality, Vietnamese brides in Singapore simultaneously, and paradoxically, channeled their mobile use to promote their beliefs about traditional roles via an essentialist self-image. We found three aspects of essentialization as ideal women desired by local men in the enactment of these beliefs facilitated by the mobile phone—femininity, wifehood, and motherhood. We argue that this idealized representation of self, along with the aspirational frame, acts as a response to the multilayered discrimination of the host society. The discriminatory environment, as evidenced by the imposition of social constraints and negative portrayals of the Vietnamese brides' identities, provoked the brides' strategic representation of self. The belief about essentialist gender roles can be derived from their originating Vietnamese culture, characterized by Confucian beliefs about the subordinate role of women in society (Schuler et al., 2006). The transnational context thus defines the women's vulnerable position, influencing their choice of strategies to gain empowerment: their feminine essence *vis-à-vis* traditional wifehood and motherhood practices.

1. Femininity

Representing themselves as superior women with feminine traits, Vietnamese brides used the mobile phone extensively as an active agent and facilitator for the enactment of an idealized femininity. Use of the mobile device was pervasive and unceasing in the maintenance of physical attractiveness. All respondents reported using applications and online resources on their smartphones for beauty tips and health advice. Internet-based applications, particularly through Google Search and YouTube, were essential tools in providing these women with information.

> I do feel that if I'm beautiful, my husband will love me more. So I suppose I always need to keep being beautiful in front of his eyes. . . . I watch and read up every day, consult news and doctors online concerning things like what to eat so as to have a fair skin, what cosmetics I should use. They teach us on websites. (Respondent 7)

The desire to show off their physical attractiveness to the Singaporean husband reaffirms their essentialist beliefs about gender identity. Like the Evil Queen's magic mirror in the Snow White fairytale, the mobile phone always had the right answer. Distinguished from an external social network, the optimal responses from the device both imbued respondents with a degree of independence and shielded them from judgment from others.

> I just need to go online, not have to ask for help from other people. See, I've just typed "beauty tips" [on Google search], so here you can see, they teach me to use turmeric to treat my skin problems, to apply

these creams and collagen to my face as well. I always search for tips with the keyword "collagen." (Respondent 19)

These essentialist notions about femininity mediated by the mobile phone instilled happiness, self-confidence, and resilience in the lives of respondents. There was perceptible joy exhibited during a demonstration of the digitization of their womanhood in terms of physical attractiveness and a hyperfemininity. The Vietnamese brides' improved psychological wellbeing depended greatly on social approval, derived from their perception of how their essential femininity affected close "others," particularly the Singaporean husband, and in public demonstrations of the results.

If I'm beautiful, I feel more confident and happy when I'm walking besides my hubby. (Respondent 15)

Yet again we find empowerment strategies intertwined with a subordinate role and an attached relationship with the Singaporean husband. The concepts of happiness and confidence were defined strategically by the women, in relation to self-image and social approval, invoking a heightened sense of femininity in their lives. These strategies, in the wives' opinions, mitigated their hostile reception in the host society, yet required the association with the husband to do so.

2. Wifehood and Motherhood Practices

Vietnamese brides in Singapore upheld their traditional role in the domestic sphere as a source of empowerment. Presenting their identity as superior wives and mothers, they compared themselves with local women.

Singaporean women do not signify family dinners. They prioritize work and leave their children to nannies. I cannot leave my child to nannies. Vietnamese women are different; we care for the husband and the family and are willing to sacrifice for the family. (Respondent 18)

Although Vietnamese respondents admired local (Singaporean) women and their higher levels of income and education, the migrants encountered discrimination from Singaporeans that compounded the Vietnamese brides' negative perception of and responses toward the dominant group. Research affirmed that perceived discrimination from the dominant group resulted in migrants' negative perception and portrayal of local citizens in Singapore (Jiang et al., 2016). This study found another subtle response: representation of a positive essentialist self in response to social prejudice and as an empowerment strategy.

The mobile phone was found to mediate the enactment of an idealized representation of the Vietnamese brides in terms of their identities as mother and wife. Mobiles were in effect making their housework more efficient. A popular practice was to harness online resources to select valued resources to improve these identities.

I usually go online learning cooking recipes and to ease my wifehood practices [Laughter]. (Respondent 1)

For instance, when there are some early symptoms of a particular health problem on my child's body, I will go Google to search for related information. (Respondent 16)

Behind the closed doors of their marital home, the ever-present mobile phone played an active role as a facilitator, providing respondents with information and assistance in fulfilling their traditional roles as a good wife and mother. Beyond general information, migrant wives obtained instant support from their close-knit network, such as female relatives in Vietnam with whom the wives could consult on mothering practices and cultural traditions.

I do call my mom and grandmother sometimes to ask for some things that I do not know. For instance, when my child gets sick sometimes, I will call my family in Vietnam. (Respondent 23)

In the absence of social support, the mobile phone even became a companion during the performance of domestic responsibilities.

Well, I watch YouTube at home, especially when I do housework. I bring the phone to the kitchen, so I can watch or listen to videos while cooking or cleaning the floor. (Respondent 24)

Importantly, the enactment of the essentialist beliefs about idealized wifehood and motherhood mediated by mobiles was deemed to contribute to the women's empowerment. The resultant idealization of self led to happiness and harmony, with improved resilience, increased marital satisfaction, and respect from others. The mobile phone, beyond a source of information and communication, became a performative space for enactment of the idealized self.

> If I cook something and want to show him what we will eat, then I will message him. I'm happy to cook for him and my child, and that's also better for their health. He seems to be happy about that, and of course I'm happy too. (Respondent 15)

The essentialization of gender, derived from and performed on the mobile phone, provided a sense of restricted agency in the lives of these marginalized women, diverging from feminist discourses of equality. However, we also need to analyze the tensions between these seemingly contradictory strategies of essentialization of gender and of aspiration for identity enhancement.

Discussion

The study results reflect diverse, oppositional, and seemingly counterproductive strategies of agency negotiated by Vietnamese brides brought to Singapore aided by mobile phones. The essentialist–aspirational dialectic as a particular gender empowerment strategy allows for nuanced discussion on the role of ICTs in achievement of agency by marginalized communities. This study highlights the need to have a critical examination of the dominant Western discourse about the role of ICTs in women's empowerment and development. Traditionally ICTs have been regarded as enablers of gender equality for women's empowerment; however, it is conversely evident that traditional practices of gender inequality can be enacted as facilitators of restricted agency for women in certain sociocultural contexts.

First, we note here that agency and empowerment are complex phenomena in relation to discussions about gender equality. In fact, specific idealized beliefs about femininity, wifehood, and motherhood among these migrant women and their enactment of these essentialist beliefs potentially abet and contribute to the reproduction of gender inequalities. This notion suggests a sense of essentialist feminism upheld by marginalized women, but often eschewed in the discourse of development in ICTD studies. This has parallels with a particular empowerment strategy—reconceptualization of inequalities to achieve empowerment—carried out by minority groups at the intersection of gender, race, and class (Boogaard & Roggeband, 2010). Paradoxically, strategies promoting gender inequality brought about empowerment along other dimensions in response to the women's struggles with other interlocking social oppressions, such as race and class.

An intersectional awareness can thus reproduce essentialist representations of gender (Mahalingam & Leu, 2005), while reconceptualizations of inequalities derived from one's intersecting identities could be one strategy of empowerment for marginalized groups (Boogaard & Roggeband, 2010). Within the sociocultural context of this study, which may not generalize to other situations, strategies of essentialist representations of gendered ethnicity allowed Vietnamese brides to live up to their familial, admittedly patriarchal, expectations while simultaneously responding to the discriminative discourse about their identities by the dominant group in the host society. The essentialist idealization of "being feminine" and "being Vietnamese" was actively constructed by the foreign brides as a positive and desirable identity in response to their marginalized status.

This study further offers a theoretical contribution in terms of the essentialist–aspirational dialectic as particular (gender) strategies of enacting restricted agency. These seemingly conflicting strategies were established by the Vietnamese brides to achieve empowerment and exhibit autonomy. The findings suggest that a static, one-sided view of agency might be insufficient to explain the lived experiences of marginalized migrant women located at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and social class. Negotiations of gender identity occurred in a process that was fluid and dynamic. The essentialist–aspirational tension encompasses elements of "dialectic negotiations" (Chib & Chen, 2011) and "complicating connectivity" (Tacchi & Chandola, 2015), involving a dynamic negotiation of agency in the presence of powerful societal structures.

Second, the study contributes theoretically to ongoing discussions on the empowerment roles of ICTs by emphasizing the restricted nature of agency achieved by marginalized people under sociostructural

constraints. Sen (2000) suggested a critical need to re-examine "agency freedom" to account for motivations and constraints under which a person acts. It is important to note that the form of agency that the Vietnamese brides gained was not an absolute freedom of choice. Existing constraints, resulting from their vulnerable position at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, social class, and migrant status, besides their limited individual capabilities, prohibited them from exhibiting an unfettered aspiration. In other words, human agency was restricted and situated in the broader sociocultural frame, compounded by one's personal barriers (Peter, 2003).

Third, we point to the fact that while enactment of strategies of aspiration and essentialization and of performance of agency were mediated by mobile phones, the technology simultaneously acted as a tool for isolation and subordination. This suggests that social hierarchies are equally as important as individual agency in determining the processes of identity management and gender role negotiation that are mediated by mobiles. Oreglia and Srinivasan (2016) found that while ICTs offered opportunities for women in China and India to develop technological and economic identities, the powerful patriarchal social structure pressured the Vietnamese brides to observe and maintain traditional gender roles. Our study reveals the need for continuing research to explore further contextual empowerment strategies and dialectical negotiations of agency among marginalized migrants.

Conclusion

We conclude with a comment on the unique position of vulnerable migrants located at the intersection of race/ethnicity, class, and gender. Transnational cultures and social structures of "here" (the host country) and "there" (the home country) may impose different or even conflicting values that migrants must contend and struggle with. The emergent nativist tendency currently seen in many host societies worldwide seems set to expand the distance between "us" and "them," "native" and "immigrant," "traditional" and "modern," while political and public discourses magnify the differences. Marginalized migrants struggle with social integration, embeddedness, and identification with the host values on the one hand, and the ties to their originating ethnic and cultural identities on the other hand (Spears & Lea, 1994). Choosing between these dichotomies need not be necessary. It is important to examine the role of ICTs in the dynamic processes of migration and marginalization, with the essentialist–aspirational dialectic as a potential strategy for empowerment to produce the enactment of restricted agency.

The study suggests the importance of examining the multiple layers of social structures and power relations that marginalized agents must encounter and negotiate. There is a need to closely examine the specific sociocultural contexts and environments that might limit an individual's capability to act, lead a valued life, and harness technological means. In conclusion, recognizing the situated nature of technological processes, social structures, and the complex articulations of agency might provoke new meanings for gender empowerment. ■

Acknowledgments

Hoan Nguyen, Project Officer, Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. th.nguyen@ntu.edu.sg

Arul Chib, Director, Singapore Internet Research Center, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. arulchib@ntu.edu.sg

Ramaswami Mahalingam, Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA. ramawasi@umich.edu

References

Alsop, R., & Heinsohn, N. (2005). *Measuring empowerment in practice: Structuring analysis and framing indicators* (No. 3510). Washington, DC: World Bank. Retrieved from https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/8856

Alvesson, M., & Sköldberg, K. (2009). *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research.* London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Andersson, A., Grönlund, Å., & Wicander, G. (2012). Development as freedom—How the capability approach can be used in ICT4D research and practice. *Information Technology for Development, 18*(1), 1–4. doi:10.1080/02681102.2011.632076

Asiedu, C. (2012). Information communication technologies for gender and development: A review of the literature. *Information, Communication & Society, 15*(8), 1186–1216. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2011.610467

Boogaard, B., & Roggeband, C. (2010). Paradoxes of intersectionality: Theorizing inequality in the Dutch police force through structure and agency. *Organization, 17*(1), 53–75. doi:10.1177/1350508409350042

Chan, J. S. (2000). The status of women in a patriarchal state: The case of Singapore. In L. Edwards & M. Roces (Eds.), *Women in Asia: Tradition, modernity and globalisation,* (pp. 39–58). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Chew, H. E., Ilavarasan, V. P., & Levy, M. R. (2015). Mattering matters: Agency, empowerment, and mobile phone use by female microentrepreneurs. *Information Technology for Development, 21*(4), 523–542. doi:10.1080/02681102.2013.839437

Chib, A., & Aricat, R. G. (2016). Belonging and communicating in a bounded cosmopolitanism: The role of mobile phones in the integration of transnational migrants in Singapore. *Information, Communication & Society, 20*(3), 482–496. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2016.1168470

Chib, A., & Chen, V. H. H. (2011). Midwives with mobiles: A dialectical perspective on gender arising from technology introduction in rural Indonesia. *New Media & Society, 12*(3), 486–501. doi:10.1177/1461444810393902

Chib, A., Malik, S, Aricat, R. G., & Kadir, S. Z. (2014). Migrant mothering and mobile phones: Negotiations of transnational identity. *Mobile Media & Communication, 2*(1), 73–93. doi:10.1177/2050157913506007

Choudhury, N. (2009). The question of empowerment: Women's perspective on their Internet use. *Gender, Technology and Development, 13*(3), 341. doi:10.1177/097185241001300302

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989*(1), Article 8. Retrieved from http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/88

Druker, P. (2001, November 1). The next society. *The Economist* [Special report: The near future]. Retrieved from http://www.economist.com/node/770819

Elster, J. (1983). *Sour grapes: Studies in the subversion of rationality.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Garrido, M., & Roman, R. (2006). Women in Latin America: Appropriating ICTs for social change. In N. J. Hafkin & S. Huyer (Eds.), *Cinderella or Cyberella?: Empowering women in the knowledge society* (pp. 165–190). Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.

Hafkin, N., & Huyer, S. (2007). Women and gender in ICT statistics and indicators for development. *Information Technologies & International Development, 4*(2), 25–41. doi:10.1162/itid.2008.00006

Hancock, A. M. (2007). When multiplication doesn't equal quick addition: Examining intersectionality as a research paradigm. *Perspectives on Politics, 5*(1), 63–79. doi:10.1017/S1537592707070065

Handapangoda, W. S., & Kumara, A. S. (2013). The world at her fingertips?: Examining the empowerment potential of mobile phones among poor housewives in Sri Lanka. *Gender, Technology and Development, 17*(3), 361–385. doi:10.1177/0971852413498742

Jiang, Q., Aricat, R., Chib, A., Chia, Z. Y., Tan, S. M., Tan, X. Q., & Woo, Z. W. (2016). Silent but brewing: Reactive ethnicity and interculturality among Chinese students in Singapore. *Journal of Intercultural Communication, 40,* 1–19. Retrieved from https://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr40/abstract40.html

Jongwilaiwan, R., & Thompson, E. C. (2013). Thai wives in Singapore and transnational patriarchy. *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography, 20*(3), 363–381. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2011.624588

Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development & Change, 30*(3), 435. doi:10.1111/1467-7660.00125

Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with patriarchy. *Gender & Society, 2*(3), 274–290. doi:10.1177/089124388002003004

Kleine, D. (2011). The capability approach and the "medium of choice": Steps towards conceptualising information and communication technologies for development. *Ethics & Information Technology, 13*(2), 119. doi:10.1007/s10676-010-9251-5

Ling, R., & Horst, H. A. (2011). Mobile communication in the Global South. *New Media & Society, 13*(3), 363–374. doi:10.1177/1461444810393899

Lynch, J., & Kaplan, G. (2000). Socioeconomic position. In L. F. Berkman & I. Kawachi (Eds.), *Social epidemiology* (pp. 13–35). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Mahalingam, R., & Leu, J. (2005). Culture, essentialism, immigration and representations of gender. *Theory & Psychology, 15*(6), 839–860. doi:10.1177/0959354305059335

Masika, R., & Bailur, S. (2015). Negotiating women's agency through ICTs: A comparative study of Uganda and India. *Gender, Technology and Development, 19*(1), 43. doi:10.1177/0971852414561615

Oreglia, E., & Srinivasan, J. (2016). ICT, intermediaries, and the transformation of gendered power structures. *MIS Quarterly, 40*(2), 501–510. Retrieved from http://misq.org/ict-intermediaries-and-the-transformation-of-gendered-power-structures.html

Peter, F. (2003). Gender and the foundations of social choice: The role of situated agency. *Feminist Economics, 9*(2–3), 13–32. doi:10.1080/1354570022000078006

Plant, S. (1998). *Zeros and ones: Digital women and the new technoculture.* London, UK: Fourth Estate.

Qureshi, S. (2015). Are we making a better world with information and communication technology for development (ICT4D) research? Findings from the field and theory building. *Information Technology for Development, 21*(4), 511–522. doi:10.1080/02681102.2015.1080428

Ramsay, J. E., & Pang, J. S. (2015). Anti-immigrant prejudice in rising East Asia: A stereotype content and integrated threat analysis. *Political Psychology, 38*(2), 227–244. doi:10.1111/pops.12312

Schuler, S. R., Hoang, A., Vu, H., Tran, M., Bui, T., & Pham, T. (2006). Constructions of gender in Vietnam: In pursuit of the "three criteria." *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 8*(5), 383–394. doi:10.1080/13691050600887949

Sen, A. K. (1980). Equality of what? In S. McMurrin (Ed.), *Tanner lectures on human values* (Vol. 1, pp. 195–220). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom.* New York, NY: Knopf.

Sen, A. (2000). *Social exclusion: Concept, application, and scrutiny* (Social Development Papers 1). Manila, the Philippines: Asian Development Bank. Retrieved from http://www.gsdrc.org/document-library/social-exclusion-concept-application-and-scrutiny/

Slater, D. (1998). Analysing cultural objects: Content analysis and semiotics. In C. Seale (Ed.), *Researching society and culture* (pp. 233–244). London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Smith, M. L., Spence, R., & Rashid, A. T. (2011). Mobile phones and expanding human capabilities. *Information Technologies & International Development, 7*(3), 77–88.

Spears, R., & Lea, M. (1994). Panacea or panopticon?: The hidden power in computer-mediated communication. *Communication Research, 21*(4), 427–459. doi:10.1177/009365094021004001

Tacchi, J., & Chandola, T. (2015). Complicating connectivity: Women's negotiations with smartphones in an Indian slum. In L. Hjorth & O. Khoo (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of new media in Asia* (pp. 179–188). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Tan, K. P. A. S. S. (2001). Civic society and the new economy in patriarchal Singapore: Emasculating the political, feminizing the public. *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies,* 95–122. doi:10.2307/40860786

Tenhunen, S. (2008). Mobile technology in the village: ICTs, culture, and social logistics in India. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 14*(3), 515–534. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9655.2008.00515.x

Thapa, D., Sein, M. K., & Sæbø, Ø. (2012). Building collective capabilities through ICT in a mountain region of Nepal: Where social capital leads to collective action. *Information Technology for Development, 18*(1), 5–22. doi:10.1080/02681102.2011.643205

Thompson, M. (2004). Discourse, "development" & the "digital divide": ICT & the World Bank. *Review of African Political Economy, 31*(99), 103–123. doi:10.1080/0305624042000258441

Yeoh, B. S., Leng, C., & Dung, V. (2013). Commercially arranged marriage and the negotiation of citizenship rights among Vietnamese marriage migrants in multiracial Singapore. *Asian Ethnicity, 14*(2), 139–156.

Zheng, Y., & Walsham, G. (2008). Inequality of what? Social exclusion in the e-society as capability deprivation. *Information Technology and People, 21*(3), 222–243. doi:10.1108/09593840810896000.