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Multimedia, Mobility, and the Digital Southeast Asian Family's Polymedia Experiences: Introduction to this Special Issue

Monika Winarnita

Southeast Asia is home to the largest number of social media users in the world. It is also a region known for its mobile population, with high numbers of overseas workers, international students, refugees/asylum seekers, and migrants seeking permanent residency or citizenship in other countries. Digital technology is shaping the way Southeast Asians express themselves, interact, maintain contact, and sustain their family relationships. Online multimedia content is one way that migrants and mobile Southeast Asians express their sense of belonging, their multiple and varied identities, their cultural backgrounds, and their sense of connectedness to family members. This special issue aims to provide a contemporary understanding of online multimedia expressions of identity, belonging, and intergenerational family relationships of migrants and mobile Southeast Asians. Six peer-reviewed journal articles and three creative commentaries explore how online multimedia productions and stories enable a deeper understanding of the effects of migration and mobility on intergenerational family relationships. By focusing on the online multimedia expressions of Southeast Asian people, this issue aims to comprehend social and cultural change in this region and the nuances of how it is being shaped by digital technologies. Moving beyond connectedness, the articles address a wide range of issues, such as power, conflict, and kinship relations. Themes such as educational mobility, the transnational family's online communication, and the hopes and affirmations shared through digital diasporic communities are explored. By focusing on multimedia, mobility, and the digital Southeast Asian family's polymedia experiences, this special issue contributes to the literature on digital networked societies.

Anthropologists Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller (2012) argue against the use of the term "multimedia." They suggest that it fails to capture the essence of the communicative environment afforded by smartphone devices, which they believe is more accurately termed "polymedia." As Miller and his colleague Heather Horst explain, polymedia encompasses "expanding media and communicative ecologies that consider the interactivity between new media and the importance of the emotional repertoire" (Horst and Miller 2012, 19). The analysis of this pioneering group of migration and digital technology studies scholars goes beyond the constraints imposed by each individual "multi-medium" to emphasise the social, emotional, and moral consequences of choosing between those different media (Madianou and Miller 2013). In this issue, both polymedia as an experience and

multimedia as a product are central to the discussion of all six articles. Although the articles explore different types of multimedia, all have specifically used the concept of polymedia to understand multimedia use.

Migration studies scholars have been pioneers in understanding practices of digital kinship and online communication. Recent scholarship on ambient kinship in the digital realm, as highlighted in Deirdre McKay's (2017) keynote speech at the workshop precursor to this special issue, concerns the importance of ambient co-presence. McKay argued that the pervasive and potent nature of mediated forms of intimate surveillance (or its ambience) becomes the necessary precondition for "doing kinship" and extending familial care in the mobile Southeast Asian family. McKay based her argument on Madianou's portrayal of ambient co-presence as "the peripheral yet intense awareness of distant others made possible through the affordances of ubiquitous media environments" (2016, 1). Social media platforms, with their users' practice of inferring virtuous kinship behaviours, or their obverse, from the online activities that increasingly characterise everyday, domestic, and personal life, now afford the kin version of surveillance a new ambient characteristic. As McKay (2017) argued, new mediated forms of "doing kinship" (through various multimedia products in mobile devices by mobile subjects) shift the meanings and expectations that people attach to their kinship ties. Moreover, the efficacy of ritual depends on the ambience afforded by polymedia, and thus kinship relations become more, rather than less, important in the lives of mobile Southeast Asians (McKay 2017).

In "Digital Family Ethnography" Monika Winarnita looks into the new theoretical development of polymedia and tries to understand the consequences of multiple forms of digital media in the context of family interpersonal communication. Specifically, Winarnita describes how Indonesian skilled migrant women in Australia use multiple social media platforms (such as Facebook, Skype, and WhatsApp) in their communications with family in their homelands. The article focuses on the constraints and challenges of employing a digital family ethnography methodology in fieldwork with transnational families. In particular, Winarnita reflects on the researcher's identity within the community under study and how it impacts the research. In addition, she looks at the ways observations of social media platforms in fieldwork relate to intergenerational family dynamics and incongruencies between offline and online presentations of self.

Eva Nisa's article extends an understanding of polymedia as a virtual (imperfect) heaven for Rohingya Muslims living in Malaysia who are claiming their place in the freedom of voice-sharing made available by a polymedia-rich environment. Her article describes how Rohingya refugees in Malaysia use social media platforms to reconnect with family members in their homeland and in resettlement countries, and how Rohingya citizen journalists use the RVision online news channel to provide counter-narratives that challenge mainstream and government news. Both vital functions are achieved through the ability of various online media technologies to support their users' multiple roles as separated family members, citizen journalists, and, in both cases, producers and consumers of social media who strategically choose which platforms suit their needs.

In "Facebook, Polymedia, Social Capital, and a Digital Family of Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers," Adriana Rahajeng Mintarsih investigates the relationship between polymedia and social capital in the context of The Voice of Singapore's Invisible Hands, an online literary community that aims to reshape the dominant—negative—discourse on migrant workers by providing access to their literary work. Mintarsih argues that polymedia's affordances have enabled the members of this community, who often feel displaced, to become a digital family in which the members provide each other with emotional support just as true family and close friends do. Moreover, this online community, which began as a language and literature learning space for Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Singapore, became a forum to creatively express (through poetry and short stories) emotions such as loss, nostalgia, and ambivalence about home and left-behind family.

Raviv Litman, also doing research in a Singaporean context but amongst more affluent students studying abroad, examines how these students communicate in a polymedia environment in which some platforms are heavily managed by government to propagate national family values, while others are less so. Litman's "Singaporean Societies: Multimedia Communities of Student Migration" looks at websites maintained by the Overseas Singaporean Unit and explores how students use the sites as a tool to access social and financial resources. Contrasting these sites with the unregulated online community of young Singaporeans studying overseas, where young people can express their frustration with state and family values of filial piety, Litman exploreshow the government sites set boundaries for the students as they reevaluate their responsibilities at home while they live abroad.

Xuan Thu Dang, Howard Nicholas, and Donna Stark's article "Multimedia and Layers of Transnational Family Communication" responds to Madianou's call for a continued exploration of polymedia (2016, 186). Seeking to understand how face-to-face and digitally mediated communication co-occur and interweave, their article focuses on the smartphone interactions of a transnational Australian Vietnamese family in Melbourne and their extended family in Vietnam that occur simultaneously while the Melbourne family views a television program together. The study uses their multiplicity framework to interpret the fluidity of multimodal communication, intimacy, and continuity across space by exploring how family members convey meaning through their interwoven use of language, gesture, bodily movement, and spatial positioning to interact with close and distant family members through digital media (specifically, a television and a smartphone).

Earvin Cabalquinto's article "Digital Ties, Disrupted Togetherness" also focuses on smartphone use, in this case with twenty-one overseas Filipino workers in Melbourne. The smartphone as a "mobile" device used by a transnational family is one way of understanding the theme of mobility. However, mobility is best understood as an interrelated concept that combines mobile practices (understood to be the use of digital communication technologies to stay connected) with mobile life (Urry 2007) as practiced by mobile subjects in a global economy (Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2007; Adey et al. 2013), whether they are international students, diasporic family members, overseas migrant workers, or refugees. Mobility is not only about how web-based platforms have moved onto mobile devices (de

Souza e Silva 2006) but also how such mobile capability allows mobile subjects to use these platforms while on the move in order to succeed in the global economy. Cabalquinto is particularly interested in the forms of inequality inherent in using mobile devices to communicate with families back in the Philippines. His article presents six categories to unpack differential communicative mobilities: access, socio-technical competency, quality of connectivity, rhythms, affective experience, and communicative space. These categories guide Cabalquinto in exposing the tensions and inequalities inherent in digital cultures.

This special issue also includes three creative commentary pieces that explore and connect with the theme of multimedia, mobility, and the digital Southeast Asian family's polymedia experience. The first is an interview with Kanti Pertiwi, creator of the online forum PhD Mama Indonesia, which aims to connect and support female Indonesian students who are pursuing doctoral degrees in foreign universities while performing their duties as wives and mothers. Dr. Pertiwi was interviewed by Lily Yulianti Farid, an academic and journalist. The interview demonstrates that the digital interaction and connection afforded by the online community reveal the challenges faced by middle-class Indonesian women when their culture, traditional values, and religion influence their perceptions of how to be a good mother and wife while spending four to seven years overseas to pursue an academic career.

The other two creative commentaries are multimedia pieces made through combining text and photos. Adriana Rahajeng Mintarsih's piece complements her peer-reviewed article in this issue. Her piece is a collection of poems with accompanying photos that were posted on social media. Written by Indonesian migrant workers who are part of a new virtual family created through the digital community Voice of Singapore's Invisible Hands, the poems express a longing for family and home. The final creative piece is a photo essay by Ang Nguyen, co-curator of the Melbourne exhibition Vietnamese Here: Contemporary Art & Reflections. Nguyen's commentary accompanies a selection of photographs by Phuong Ngo, an artist who took part in the exhibition about Vietnamese migrants in Australia. Nguyen curated the photo exhibition because she was inspired by her doctoral research on Vietnamese refugees who maintain Facebook groups to share their experiences by posting photos from their personal archives. These archival photos, taken during their journey as refugees, were a way for the Facebook group members to reconnect, tell stories, and curate their own online history and ultimately create extended kinship relations based on their shared diasporic experiences.

These three creative commentaries are an important addition to this special issue. They show how emotional repertoires (as a feature of polymedia) are expressed in multimedia forms to tell stories of digital and variously mobile Southeast Asian families.

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