

## **All we need is love—and a mobile phone: texting in the Philippines**

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### **Abstract**

Asia is the leader of digital and mobile culture and the Philippines: the world's texting capital. This paper provides an overview of my anthropological fieldwork and explores the intricate relationship between different types of love—platonic, familial, romantic, erotic, secretive, humanitarian and religious—and cell phone use. *Platonic Love* is explored by examining the way friendship networks are bolstered through continual text and *Familial Love* is investigated in light of the national economic situation, characterized by high relocation and migration overseas, whereby texting enables fractured families to maintain social cohesion, despite geographic division. When looking at *Romantic Love*, I discuss the cell phone as a medium to woo and demonstrate that the mobile phone supplies young people with an avenue to express their curiosities and desires where hitherto they would be more tightly bound to traditional courtship and gender rules. I then explore how cell phone communication aids sexual play, innuendo and can act to deepen intimate relationships: *Erotic Love*. Conversely, I look the cell phone's role in enhancing partner infidelity, linking this to wider cross-cultural findings. I turn briefly to discuss *Humanitarian Love*, and the role of the cell phone in the overthrowing Filipino president Joseph Estrada. Lastly I discuss *Religious Love*: the exchange of religious-coded texts among social groups and commercial markets whereby Filipinos are encouraged to “text god.”

It is fascinating to me how such a small device, and such a relatively new technology, could have such an enormous impact on people across the world. Twenty-five years ago, the mass-market commercial cellular phone system was first introduced to us (Brown et al 2002: 8) and, in 1992, the first text message was sent. Yet now it is hard to imagine the metropolitan middle class without use of this fifth limb, this magic transmitter, this hand-held, postmodern, epi-universe: commonly referred to as the cell phone.

Indeed, it is almost miraculously interesting to me, how this invention has embodied us, become an essential part of divergent lives across divergent cultures. How the cell phone affects the Filipina teenager, the Hong Kong businessman, and the Irish priest is all together different, yet nevertheless profound. The cell phone is now linked to: the enterprising efforts of those involved in the micro-businesses of Rwanda (see Donner 2003: 393-411); the Finnish woman who lies to her husband by text—*I was just at my sister's house, darling*—when in fact she was in bed with his colleague. To the Japanese student, who when angry at a friend, rather than initiating a conversation, sends a pictogram of fist or a tiger to convey his resentment (Riviere and Licoppe 2005: 122). To the Malaysia man who divorced his wife by text and was legitimized to do so by the Malaysian Islamic court (Kent 2003). The parent in Melbourne who receives a text message from her son's school informing her that has not showed up to class (Green 2004: 4-5). To the American man who has US porn star Jenna Jameson's moans downloaded into his phone as a ringtone. The African shepherd in the drought-ridden Sahel region who alerts another shepherd by text to sites of high-quality grazing (Gwin 2005). The Scottish elementary school boy who is terrorized by the threatening text messages he keeps receiving from the school bully. The TB patient in South Africa who is reminded by text to take his medication (Mitchell 2003: 9). The Australian woman before going out on a Saturday night, using the *Dialing under the Influence Device* on her phone to temporarily bar her from being able to call her ex-boyfriend, whom she misses almost desperately (Bullard 2004). To the Singaporean who in 2001 was the first person in the world to be fired by text (Soh 2001). And lastly, to this anthropologist who has built a career studying people's relationship to their cell phones.

Whether we direct our research gaze to Hong Kong, Australia, Israel, the US, or Korea, what we are finding are growing masses of wirelessly-connected inhabitants communicating in a cyber arena. This global phenomenon is creating fundamental transformations in the way individuals perceive themselves and their communities, to the way they construct the world—and the way that they love. Today I'll look specifically at the Philippines and provide an overview of the intricate relationship between cell phone use and different types of love—platonic, familial, romantic, erotic, secretive, humanitarian and religious—in order to demonstrate how mobile telephony enables the technological extension of a communicative self.

### **texting: the national pastime**

Cell phones were introduced into the Philippines only in 1999; the country is now heralded as the texting capital of the world, with one hundred million texts being sent around the archipelago daily (Pertierra et al 2002: 87-88).<sup>1</sup> Colloquially Filipinos refer to texting as “the national pastime” and to themselves as “generation texters.”<sup>2</sup> The popularity of texting is directly related to the inadequate infrastructure and notorious unreliability of traditional landlines and the low cost of SMS (Strom 2002: 274-283).<sup>3</sup>

### **fieldwork**

My research was conducted mainly in Kalibo, a semi-urban town in the central Philippines, over the years of 2001 to 2003.<sup>4</sup> To gain an in-depth understanding of young women’s lives and of the role mobile communication, I applied standard anthropological methodologies, including participant observation, focus group discussions, surveys and in-depth interviews.<sup>5</sup> Data was also informed by young men’s experiences, analysis of popular culture<sup>6</sup> and my collection of text messages received or sent by interviewees or received by myself, which consisted of over 1000 in all.<sup>7</sup>

### **love of friend, love of family**

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<sup>1</sup> Although the ratio of cell phones to population in the Philippines is low by international standards, the number of text messages sent by SMS users is double the world average (Pertierra et al 2002: 87-88).

<sup>2</sup> The Pulse Asia survey, conducted from March 29<sup>th</sup> to April 12<sup>th</sup> 2003 with 12,000 persons, found that one in three Filipinos use mobile phones, including 17% of the poorest sector, with 70% of SMS users reporting that they send as many as 10 texts per day, and 11% between 11-20 messages per day (Marfill 2003: A1, A14).

<sup>3</sup> Sending one text message costs a mere peso (approximately U.S \$ 0.02), compared with the relatively expensive rates of voice calls made directly from one’s cell phone or landline.

<sup>4</sup> Although data was derived principally from Kalibo, I was also able to observe texters in Manila and in (holiday-destination) Boracay.

<sup>5</sup> Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with fifty young women and approximately thirty prominent community players including: health practitioners, religious heads, social commentators and artists.

<sup>6</sup> Here I am referring to media (newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and film), advertising, and text how-to books.

<sup>7</sup> By living in the local community, and by being in an age category that was similar to my participants, many of the “research subjects” became close friends. The nature of our friendships allowed for the mutual sharing of intimate narratives regarding (text) experiences and relationships.

In the Philippines friendship networks are bolstered through recurrent text communication and ultimately act to deepen *platonic love*. Messages are either self-composed and context-dependent (e.g. how was ur exam?) or the passing of what I've termed as *Hallmark messages*: chain-like forwarded texts relating to humor, love, current events, friendship, or god.<sup>8</sup> Receiving such messages charge texters with a sense of being cared for and remembered and are perceived to nurture relationships through *thoughtfulness* and through these, respondents found great emotional support, as Melinda (age 29, married, mother) commented:

The texts my friends send me make me feel better when I'm down. Sometimes it's coincidental; they send me messages that I need to hear. They can be significant in your daily life. It's good to have someone reminding you how wonderful life is.

Texting thus acts as a form of social or emotional hospitality,<sup>9</sup> as goodwill enacted on a micro level through cyber means. This notion of goodwill can be likened to Mauss's (1924) conceptions of gift giving and reciprocity.<sup>10</sup>

The family unit is almost rhetorically important to Filipinos and, in the current economic situation, characterized by high relocation and migration, with estimates of Filipinos living and working overseas ranging from 4 to 6.5 million (Tan et al. 2002: 1),<sup>11</sup> the cell phone has irrefutably become a chief medium to express *familial love* (Paragas 2003). Being able to "communicate even if you're far apart" with a loved one was reverently cherished by numerous respondents. Speaking for many people's experiences, Anna said: "Through text, even if you can't hear his voice, it feels like he is just nearby". Texting fosters

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<sup>8</sup> For example: "Evn w out c n each odr much, evn w out talkn oftn, TRUE frends nvr part dey remain FOREVER n d hart. Gud pm & God bless!" Translation: Even without seeing each other much, even without talking often, TRUE friends never part they remain FOREVER in the heart. Good afternoon and God bless!

<sup>9</sup> Hospitality is a highly honored Filipino (e.g. Agoncillo and Guerrero, 1977) and certainly Kalibonhon (Reyes-Tinagan, 2001) trait.

<sup>10</sup> In *The Gift*, Mauss argues that reciprocity is not only situated through economic exchange, but is found to operate in social systems. Mauss contends that parties are obligated to exchange goods *appropriately* and this is dependent on the specific cultural context. Texting can thus be viewed as a somewhat balanced form of reciprocity, where like is exchanged for like (text for text). In addition, although there is no time set for "text repayment," differing assumptions regarding *appropriate* SMS communication is cause for strife among social actors. Other researchers have also linked texting to Mauss's (1924) conceptions of reciprocity (see Kasesniemi and Rautianen 2002; Pertierra 2002; Taylor and Harper 2002; and Yoon 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Tan et al (2002: 1) argue that it is difficult to determine absolute numbers of Filipinos living and working overseas due to the large amount of individuals working abroad illegally.

virtual communities that cut across geography and time zones: enabling fractured families with a financially solvent way to maintain social cohesion and create connection despite geographic division.

### **romantic, erotic and secretive love: enchantment and disenchantment**

In a recent (2002) Asia-wide survey about cell use, the Philippines topped “the most expressive in love” category and was heralded “Asia’s text Casanova,” with 58% of respondents communicating “I love you” by SMS (Ho 2003: A4).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, traditional Filipino courtship practices such as *harana* (serenading, see Aguilar 2003), the sending of love letters, and formal introductions have collectively set the platform for texting as a new mode of seduction, which I refer to as *cyber serenade*. The cell phone has become a dynamic site to express, nurture or play with notions of *romantic love* and, although the content and substance of exchanges may vary, over time, text-relationships often become more meaningful in the user’s life, creating emotional dependency, shared references, a sense of excitement, and sometimes even love...<sup>13</sup>

Numerous cross-cultural studies have replicated findings that the cell phone provides its users a site to explore their desires, versus traditional face-to-face communication which may act to restrain such expression (Ellwood-Clayton 2003, 2004; Kasesniemi and Rauntianen 2002; Pertierra et al. 2002). By removing aural, visual and vocal signals, bravery is instilled among communicators, particularly in the beginning stages of courtship, particularly for women (Byrne and Findlay 2004: 4).<sup>14</sup> Equipped with a cell phone, women are now also given poetic license.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, more than three quarters of my interview respondents stated that they felt braver with text, sometimes resulting in inversions of traditional gender roles<sup>16</sup> and sometimes resulting in the expression of *erotic love*. Inspiring innuendo and sexual wordplay

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<sup>12</sup> Countries included in the study were: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and India. Around 1, 4000 questionnaires were distributed in each country with participants aged 15-29.

<sup>13</sup> As Honey (age 25, weaver) said: “Based on my experiences, you become closer to your textmate. Your feelings develop and sometimes you fall in love with him. That’s really true.”

<sup>14</sup> In an Australian study about romantic communication channel preference among unmarried heterosexuals, O’Sullivan (2000) found that mediated communication, such as texting, provides a “buffer effect” in terms of impression management. Physical distance negates potentially negative face-to-face rejection signals e.g. facial expressions, intonation.

<sup>15</sup> Here I am arguing that texting is uprooting traditional romance scripts (Simon and Gagnon 1984, 1986, 1987) whereby men are positioned as active agents and women as *pakipot* (demure, modest) (Tan 2001).

<sup>16</sup> As one respondent, Issa (age 23), said: “Of course, he can’t see you, he doesn’t know you. You have the guts to text, saying whatever you want to say. What I can’t tell in person, I text. I got to say that I like him, what really I feel.”

among its users, texting can act to deepen intimate relationships. These factors work together to position texting as a tool of *enchantment*, providing young women with a site to explore with their desires with few physical consequences or associated risks. Texting serves as a mechanism of agency in light of traditional power-geometries of place (Ito and Okabe 2005) and conventional gender prescriptions. Through *private* communication, experimentation overrides impression management.

This sense of bravery also plays out in a phenomenon that can only be described as a *postmodern form of blind dating*: anonymous texters.<sup>17</sup> According to the Asian Pulse survey (2002), 27% of Filipino males and 24% of females flirt over the mobile phone with strangers and, indeed, more than three quarters of my interview participants had experiences with anonymous texters, with just less forming regular text relationships with them.

Texting in the Philippines is transforming conventional fairytales.<sup>18</sup> Urban legends are being turned into cyber ones. Popular mythology is full of tales of young people finding one another through texting, falling in love, meeting—in person—and then, the pinnacle act: getting married. Rose, a 64-year-old cottage worker recounts:

I have a daughter that married her textmate. The guy came here right away after they got to know each other through texting. He is from western Luzon. At first, I'm reluctant with the guy. But he seems so courteous—he would even ask my permission before he'd take out my daughter.

The cell phone can also greatly enhance the maintenance of partner infidelity or *secret love* (Ellwood-Clayton, in press). According to Rome-based private eye Miriam Tomponzi, there are three prerequisites in order to “cheat” successfully. They are to: “delete your phone records from the phone memory, delete text messages and learn to fake a work conversation if a lover calls when a spouse is present” (Dow 2002: 18).

According to my respondents, Filipino men frequently pretend that they are single and woo unsuspecting women by text. Often by the time the texting parties have met, the duped woman is already in “in love” with the married man, making physical indiscretion more probable. Owning multiple SIM cards is a

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<sup>17</sup> The scripted nature of such text interaction is strong: after initial preliminary questions—the gender, age and availability of a textee—or almost immediately, the anonymous texter will ask: “can I b ur txtm8?” (can I be your textmate?).

<sup>18</sup> Not unlike a Cinderella-themed narrative: the ballroom can be conceived as cyberspace, where instead of dancing, Cinderella and the Prince text one another. The fit of the glass slipper can be compared to text skill. The fairy godmother can be envisioned as technology; and the evil stepsisters: a stolen phone, a faulty SIM card, and no signal (fieldnotes 2003).

popular way to simultaneously maintain numerous clandestine relationships, a fact which is not lost upon most Filipinas. Indeed, one young couple I encountered during fieldwork exchanged cell phones “for an entire week” in order to demonstrate their fidelity to one another.

Threatened by exposure, secrecy is a defining element of the traditional affair. Lying by text demands less performance than face-to-face betrayal as facial and voice indicators may give deception away. Texting grants users the ability to craft their communication, and to position their spatial and temporal locations so to impact favorably upon impression management. Negotiating dual communication desires—normalcy to one’s primary partner, and connection to one’s lover—is enhanced by the silent, flexible, on-body cyber device: the cell phone.

However, since infidelity is often hidden, many who are suspicious look for behavioral clues, or increasingly, I believe, work to secretly get a hold of their partner’s cell phone, that is, to play *cyber detective*. According to my research, this is indeed a widespread phenomenon, particularly for women. If not finding incriminating evidence of an affair, some women continue to sporadically check their partner’s cell phone as it gifts them a feeling of reassurance that nothing wayward is occurring.

Although texting is increasingly relied upon to maintain extradyadic relationships, according to an Australian private detective specializing in infidelity, information technologies are also the chief way infidels are exposed (Dow 2002: 16); and, a study conducted in Italy, found that cell phones were involved in 90% of discovered affairs (ibid.). Indeed, text messages, voice messages and call register are now admissible in the court of law in infidelity cases in numerous countries (Dow 2002: 16): users often leave *cyber footprints*. Thus affairs and the mobile phone have become increasingly hand-in-hand and, ironically, the same medium that enhances the workings of an affair also causes *disenchantment*: i.e. discovery:

There is a growing global market targeted for catching cheating partners and, in the Philippines, using a cell phone to catch an unfaithful partner is becoming institutionalized. In late 2003, the Philippines began a “report-a-mistress” campaign. Established to promote anti-corruption, a hotline was created so that citizens could report any extramarital affairs conducted by government officials, soldiers and/or policemen. According to the BBC, on the first day of the campaign, “report-a-mistress” received approximately 500 calls, e-mails and text messages from the public.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For more information see: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/3143018.stm>.

### **give me a higher love: humanitarian and religious love**

Cell discourse has infiltrated Filipino social life as a powerful, far-reaching communication device which can act to bolster *humanitarian love*. A strong example of this is its instrumental role in the overthrowing of Filipino president Joseph Estrada in January 2001 (Rafael 2003). Text messaging was used to propagate anti-Estrada sentiments, organize massive demonstrations against the President, and during these protests, in response to riot police, to redirect crowds (Katz and Aakus 2002: 3; Paragas 2003; Pertierra 2002). Here we can see Filipinos' amassed together by way of technology for a greater good.

Filipinos also use the cell phone to express *religious love* (Ellwood-Clayton, 2004). It is extremely common for texters to send religious-based messages to one another. I have named this practice *text gospel*. The common passing of texts such as "SACRED HEART of JESUS CHRIST shower d person readn dis w ur blessings 2day & always. Gud am!<sup>20</sup>" mean that religious communication, as a micro, daily social relation occurring between individuals, has an alternative site of expression; it has literally become based in the *hands of the people* rather than primarily through institutions.

New commercial markets have arisen in the Philippines whereby texters are encouraged to text religious corporations in order to access spiritual readings. Manila Auxiliary Bishop Socrates Villegas's archdiocese, for example, recently launched "Catextism", a service that provides spiritual readings and prayer through SMS. The Bishop said, "Texting is now undeniably a way of life for the largely Roman Catholic Philippines."<sup>21</sup> The service works in collaboration with the Philippines' two top cellular phone companies. To access Catextism, texters key in the word "Amen" on their cell phones and send it to a particular number, and subsequently receive a menu of spiritual readings and prayers.

Also, during my last visit to the Philippines I noticed a campaign in all of the main newspapers: *Addicted to God: Addict mobile, get hooked*. Here Filipinos are encouraged to text God. The ads "Passion" and "Devotion" read:

Here's how you can get addicted to God through Addict Mobile: Simply start a conversation with God by texting your thoughts, feelings and prayers to 463. You'll receive personal replies of God's Word to guide you in your life. So text God now!

One of my younger respondents did just this; in her words:

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<sup>20</sup> Translation: Sacred heart of Jesus Christ shower the person reading this with your blessings today and always. Good morning!

<sup>21</sup> See Independent Online. (2002). *A step beyond: The gospel according to SMS*. Retrieved April 12th, 2002, from [http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?click\\_id=29&art\\_id=ct2002041211115754B260390&set\\_id=1A](http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?click_id=29&art_id=ct2002041211115754B260390&set_id=1A)



When I feel like praying or when I feel down, I send my messages to GOD at #463. A reply comes with a Bible verse related to my problem. For instance, I texted: "Dear God, please help me. I am broken hearted." The reply was: "Mission Possible! :=) Isaiah 14:24 'Surely as I hav planned, so it wil b, & as I hav purposed, so it will stand.' --Love, God.

Although the ways in which texting is appropriated are culturally and historically specific, as Riviere and Licoppe (in press) state, within a wider historical framework, localized findings can also generate overall insights about the direction of interpersonal communications, as I hope I have done with my discussion of love in the cyber Philippines.

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