



## Cell phone networks and migrant networks: The case of *Nayu* migrant workers in Malaysia

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### Abstract

To be able to communicate as and when one wants to is to be empowered. The increasing use of cell phones has indeed become a significant part of the everyday life for migrant workers. The cell phones which already play such a vital role in enhancing migrant workers' geographical mobility are now used for connection and to maintain social contacts. This paper examines the relationship between cell phone networks and the social networks among Thailand's migrant *Nayu* workers and finds that the cell phone is used by them to maintain and reinforce existing networks and to create new social ties among fellow workers. The cell phone enables the migrant workers to stay connected at all time to their networks whether they are absent from home, at work or crossing the border both in Thailand and Malaysia.

**Keywords:** cell phone, geographical mobility, migrant network, migrant workers, social networks, worker empowerment

### Introduction

The cell phone is a communication technology that is easy to use and access everywhere. Even migrant workers with low incomes and limited literacy are able to own and use cell phones. The cell phone is important in keeping the migrant networks connected as migrant workers in Malaysia in particular irregular workers are not easily able to connect to their networks on a face-to-face basis and the cell phone provides a channel for communication between people in different locations with those absent from their lives. Everyone in Malaysia is able to access the cell phone as there are cell phone towers all over the country, even in the countryside and in remote rural areas. The cell phone, thus, has become an important tool to connect migrant workers and maintain their social ties regardless of space, distance and frontiers.

*Nayu* workers who are Malay dialect speaking Thai in the lower southern Thailand are a part of migrant workers in Malaysia and have little education and a low income both in Thailand and Malaysia. Although Wi-Fi internet is available free in Kuala Lumpur as Kuala Lumpur's local government supports free access to the internet throughout the city, they do not use the internet because migrant workers and their parents can not afford a computer. Even if they were able to access the internet, they could not connect with their networks outside Kuala Lumpur and with their families who live in the Thai countryside which lacks access to the internet network system.

The increasing use of cell phones is a significant part of everyday life among *Nayu* migrant workers in Malaysia. This paper examines how cell phone networks as the new communication technology are integral to migrant networks among *Nayu* migrant workers in Malaysia. I begin by describing the reasons why migrants decide to have their own cell phone, and then discuss where they purchase their phone and how they choose a cell phone provider. I identify who migrant workers call and examine the relationships between cell phone networks and migrant networks.

## Research methodology

The study of migrant networks provides greater insight into why and how people move. This study uses the role of the new communication technology within migrant network approach to study irregular *Nayu* migrant workers in Malaysia. This study uses a qualitative approach to understand social reality on its own terms, based on the understanding of people themselves and on observations of their interactions in natural setting. Qualitative methods allowed the researcher to access the inner reality of human experience because they emphasise the importance of examining social phenomena from the point of view of participants.

Research methodologies each have their limitations, but by using a variety of methods, the negative effects of each can be minimized. Accordingly, this study obtained primary data via in-depth interviews but documented were also studies and direct observation conducted. It focuses mainly on *Nayu* migrant workers but also draws on a variety of other key informants, including employers. The snowballing interview technique was important because a large majority of the *Nayu* workers were working irregularly and, hence, are irregular. Given that there were no records on irregular migrant workers to be used as a sampling frame, snowball sampling was used. Snowballing would also help the researcher to uncover and effectively delineate the networks of which these workers are a part. The field interviews were conducted with sixty *Nayu* migrant workers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

## Migrant network analysis

Boyd (1989, p645) argued that “a starting point for research on social networks is that structural factors provide the context within which migration decisions are made by individuals or groups.” According to Massey (1990, p8), “migrant networks are one element of social context that strongly affect the migration decision”. However, Pessar (1999, p583) has argued that migration networks involve the production of social roles as well. Networks tie places of origin and destination together and impact on and are affected by migration they involve the key social and cultural variables that must be paid attention to in migration studies (Brettell, 2000). Gurak and Caces (1992) suggest that migration research should investigate the form and the function of migration networks across types of migration, cultures, political contexts, migration stages, and subpopulations. While research on migration has paid attention to the role of networks, it often does not consider how migrant networks affect the migration process itself nor pay attention to the differential effects of migration on the individual (Hagan, 1998).

However, it is the case that in the last several decades, in a variety of ways, scholars have paid growing attention to the concept of migrant networks in order to understand migration (Choldin, 1973; Bala'n, 1992; Lindquist, 1993). This includes: the decision to migrate (Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991); the direction and persistence of migration flows (Massey, Alarco'n et al., 1987; Tamar, 1998; Bagchi, 2001); and the process of adaptation and patterns of settlement (Massey, Alarco'n et al., 1987; Boyd, 1989; Hagan, 1998). The literature shows that networks link original and destination communities and ease the newly-arrived migrants into their new ways of life. Migrants pass on their knowledge through social ties to newly arrived migrants which assist their migration in several ways. They provide information about jobs and accommodation and reduce the costs of travel and of living (Massey, Alarco'n et al., 1987; Massey, 1990). These networks assist with finance, accommodation, food and transportation.

In migration studies, ‘a migrant network’ is defined as a set of cross-border interpersonal ties connecting migrants, former migrants and non-migrants in places of origin and destination through the bonds of kinship, friendship and a shared community of origin (Massey, Alarco'n et al., 1987; Gurak & Caces, 1992; Massey, Arango et al., 1998). Thus this definition refers to the personal relationships based on kin, family, friends and community that connect people between and within two or more areas. These relationships establish mutual trust among network members. Migrant networks are important in facilitating migration and, more significantly in the beginning stages, in encouraging potential migrant workers.

Migrant networks facilitate, in particular, informal channels of migration and they provide the means to gain employment and to find accommodation. The costs and risks of movement for

members of networks are lower because the experiences accumulated by earlier waves of migrants are available to newly arriving migrants (Gurak & Caces, 1992). Migrants who have access to migrant networks are therefore more likely to be safer and to adapt more easily to the new culture than those without networks. For these reasons, Hugo (1995) argues that migrant networks are a crucial part of migration to Malaysia. Klanarong (2005) also found that female Thai Muslims who migrate to work in Malaysia tend to utilise their networks of friends, relatives and family members rather than a private recruitment agency.

A key focus of migrant network analysis, then, is the connection between micro-level interactions and the macro-level (Granovetter, 1973; Goss & Lindquist, 1995). The study of migrant networks provides greater insight into why and how people move. This study uses a migrant network approach to study how cell phone networks are integral to migrant networks among irregular *Nayu* migrant workers in Malaysia in order to understand the new media factor shaping migrant networks.

## Results and discussion

### *Why migrants have a cell phone*

There are several reasons why migrants decide to own cell phones. The main reason is because they need their cell phone to contact their family at home. The second reason is that individual phone ownership signals their independence from their family and relatives. The cell phone is also a social status symbol. Thirdly, cell phones make the continuation of parenting possible across long distances. Fourthly, a cell phone enables communication among members of migrant networks in Malaysia. Finally the *Nayu* workers like to have their own cell phone for personal safety and in case of an emergency.

*Nayu* workers use their cell phone to maintain relationships with their families in Thailand while they are far away from home. Having a phone means that they can exchange experiences and news across the border. They call their family when they are homesick and their family can also contact them.

I got one as I need to call my parents. I could contact them any where and any time and also my parents could contact me when they miss me. [Single, Male]

Similarly, Ke Yang's (2008) study on cell phone use among internal migrant workers in Beijing found that the cell phone allows migrant workers to maintain connections and develop relations with the people they have left behind. The cell phones connect workers to family members at home and allow workers to hear the voices of loved ones alleviating some of their loneliness and sadness in Beijing. Talking on the cell phone alleviates their emotional distress while far away from home (Yang, 2008). Law and Peng (2007) also found that migrant workers in China use their cell phone for keeping in touch with their families or their relatives.

Secondly, *Nayu* workers feel the need to be independent. There are some *Nayu* workers who do not have their own cell phone. In particular, young new migrants share a cell phone with their kin while working with them in the same workplace. Independence means having more privacy to contact and communicate with friends without using kin's cell phones. After they have worked in Malaysia for a period, they make new friends in Malaysia, in particular boyfriends or girlfriends.

While I didn't have it, I borrowed it from others and paid for credits used, but not often because I was considerate to them. Since I was uncomfortable to use it, I bought a new cell phone with which I could call anyone at any time. [Married, Female]

Wang also found that Vietnamese female migrants in Taiwan used cell phones to create their own space to escape the surveillance of their relatives (2007, p722). She found that:

Many informants have their own mobile phone, which saves all the phone numbers of their close friends. Since the parents-in-law often monitor their daughter-in-law's phone calls, the best way to escape this censorship, and at the same time create a private space of their own, is to use a mobile phone.

Thirdly, most *Nayu* workers are not likely to go out much with their friends in Malaysia because they are irregular migrant workers with little time off. Life is without freedom, and having a cell phone means they are able to maintain contact with their network although they seldom meet.

According to Kitiarsa (2006, p16) the use of the cell phone is popular among Thai migrant workers in Singapore to maintain their co-ethnic contacts through voice calls and sending messages because they had no time to meet in everyday life. Although *Nayu* workers purchase a cell phone to contact their family at home while working in Malaysia, they use the phone for many other reasons, to alleviate loneliness and for information and support.

The cell phone is important for me to live here as if I don't have a phone then I can't contact anyone. In the past, everyone didn't have cell phones. I could live happily but when they got them, I needed to have one too. Life without the mobile phone would be a terrible life; it would be too lonely then. I work here all the time and don't go out. [Single, Kathoey]

A cell phone is a social status symbol. Although the price of cell phones has decreased, it does not mean that migrant workers necessarily buy cheap phones. They prefer purchasing expensive cell phones of the popular brand names, such as the Nokia N series, Sony, Motorola and the expensive cell phones with multimedia entertainment functions including camera, music, games, and a 3D function. These additional functions not only serve the purpose of communication and entertainment but are a signal of social status as well. These cell phones are quite expensive and can cost more than the migrant workers' monthly income.

Migrant workers love to use a luxury cell phone to flaunt their social status with their friends. Some migrant workers buy new cell phones when their old one becomes out-dated. They show their cell phones to their friends when they meet and socialise, displaying them on the table or holding them in their hands while meeting friends who have just ordinary cell phones without many multimedia functions. For them, the cell phones are a high value commodity like gold, which gives them confidence.

I bought a new cell phone which was my first cell phone in my life when I started working in Malaysia. The first one was a normal Motorola. Then I changed it for a new Nokia because it was far more appealing, can take pictures, and allows me to listen to music. In my free time, I like to play the options on the phone . . . If no one calls me, I will use it to listen to music and to play games. In the past, I could live without it, but today I am addicted to it. I know its usage wastes money, but I still use it . . . People here [migrant workers] like to show off their new cell phones and they are kind of competitive in having cell phones. [Single, Female]

Some *Nayu* workers purchase a second-hand cell phone as it is cheaper than a new one. They tend to purchase a phone with many functions at a lower price and often exchange their old cell phones for the new ones when theirs are out of date, often at least twice in a year. When they possess an expensive cell phone, they are seen by friends as having higher social status and wealth. They like to show off to their friends.

I just bought a second-hand cell phone last night for about 600 RM. I was interested in this cell phone's version for a few months but I didn't have enough money to buy it. It cost about 1000 RM. But now I could buy it as it wasn't too expensive.... I just bought this old one 3 months ago. I got bored with it and I might buy a new one. If I want something and I can buy it, I feel happy. It encourages me to work. [Single, Male]

Similarly, in Cara Wallis's study (2008) on cell phone use and young internal migrant women in Beijing, she found that some migrant women bought expensive phones with camera and mp3 functions which to be important among internal migrant women in the presentation of their identities, as a part of their everyday life, and as status symbols. In addition, a phone is clearly associated with sophisticated femininity, with being modern and with being urban among rural migrant women (Cara 2008, pp158-161). According to Law and Peng (2007, p130), not losing face, a deeply rooted cultural element, is very important too.

Finally, some *Nayu* have their own cell phone in case of emergencies while in Malaysia.

I went out after living here for 2 months. A policeman came and checked my passport. Unfortunately, I couldn't communicate with him at all. I didn't know what to do, and I didn't have a cell phone. I asked him if I could use a public phone to call the shop owner. But there was no public phone around there. After that, the Chief of Police came and looked at my visa. He told me that the visa was not expired and it

was new. Then, they let me go. If I was caught at that time, my boss probably wouldn't know. So, I think that cell phone is important. [Single, Male]

Other studies have also found that the cell phone has an emergency function, as many consumers employ the cell phone to call a help line in case of emergency and special non-routine situations in their daily life (Chapman & Schofield, 1998; Geser, 2004).

Cell phones play an important role in geographical mobility. *Nayu* workers are likely to move to other restaurants. They are mobile workers, who usually do not stay in the same place for long. When they leave their former colleagues in Malaysia, they would lose contact with them without a cell phone as there are no fixed-line telephones at their restaurants or at their accommodation. Having a cell phone is like having a friend on hand. Migrant workers are able to connect with their friends everywhere and at any time when they feel lonely and bored. The cell phone, thus, enables immediate and easy connection to their networks that are far away from them.

#### *What cell phone provider migrants use*

After they purchase a cell phone, *Nayu* workers chose an appropriate service from the wide variety offered by network providers. All of them use the prepaid service system from the same network providers as those of their migrant network in Malaysia, as the rate is cheaper when they call other cell phones on the same phone network. New migrant workers follow the older members of their networks, using the same providers to save money. After they obtain a cell phone and a prepaid network provider, they connect through their cell phone to their migrant networks in both Thailand and Malaysia. However, they tend to connect only with those who use the same prepaid phone network. The prepaid service rate on a different network is quite expensive. The selection of a provider is strongly influenced by their migrant network. Almost all purchase the cell phone provider on the advice of their friends, relatives and colleagues because there are many providers in Malaysia. The migrant workers use the same network provider because it is cheaper to make calls.

I have used the SIM card of the Maxis cell phone network provider since I first started using the phone because several friends have used the network to call each other and save their money on the internal network. At that time, my friend in the restaurant took me to buy the phone and subscribed to the network for me at a mobile phone shop. I have never changed this network. [Single, Female]

Some informants have one cell phone but two different providers. They have two providers for the one cell phone because they use one provider for domestic calls to their friends in Malaysia and another for international calls to their family in Thailand.

I would always call my family myself as it would be much more expensive for them to call me. When I call my family in Thailand, I use DiGi for it is cheaper. However, calling my own friends in Malaysia, I use Maxi. In my cell phone, there are two phone numbers. [Single, Female]

As *Nayu* workers are foreigners in Malaysia and many are irregular, having their own cell phone provider is not simple because they have to provide some proof of their identity. They need a passport and an address in Malaysia. This can be a big deal for newcomers so they follow the advice of experienced migrant workers to obtain a provider. Some new migrants' passports have expired and most migrant workers have no address because they live in a tiny divided room or in a small space in the kitchen in the restaurants in which they work. However, some migrant workers live in small rental accommodation which their owner provides for them as permanent accommodation. So newcomers who would like to have their own prepaid provider, need to take experienced workers with their own address along with them for help and consultation.

All informants use prepaid providers because it is cheaper. They top up a prepaid card online as there are many prepaid cell phone service shops near their restaurants. They do not spend much topping up their prepaid cell phone once they are connected to their networks: around 5 to 10 RM at a time, making a total cost of 50 to 150 RM per month. However, this cost is quite high in proportion to their income and is their principal living cost per month. Everyone knows that they spend a great deal of their income on prepaid cell phones, but they never think of giving it up.

#### *Who migrant workers call*

*Nayu* workers live in two worlds simultaneously. They stay in contact with their kin and friends in both Malaysia and Thailand to maintain their social relationships and to stay connected to their

networks. As other studies on transnationalism have shown migrants manage linkages with two countries at the same time (Rudnick, 2009; Suksomboon, 2009). With transnational calls, migrant workers connect with their parents, their spouses and their children. *Nayu* workers live a long way from their families, so they regularly make contact by phone. Migrants living and working overseas use the cell phone to express family love. Voice calls and text messages maintain social cohesion, with families fractured by distance (Rhacel, 2005; Wilding, 2006; Nagasaka, 2007; Uy-Tioco, 2007; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009).

Although young migrant workers and single migrant workers are separated from their parents and family members, the cell phone makes intimacy possible. Young female migrant workers make more international calls than young male migrant workers. They use voice calls to their homes in Thailand more than text messages because the price is no different between sending a text message and making a voice call. They make more voice calls to their family than their family makes to them. Their family often make “a missed call”<sup>1</sup> which signals that their family would love to talk with them in Malaysia and then they call their families back in Thailand. Their families make a missed call because the price of transnational voice calls from Thailand to Malaysia is more expensive than for voice calls from Malaysia to Thailand.

I have my phone to contact my parents when I need to talk and I miss them. I always use my phone. I call my mother at home, I miss my mother. But they don't miss me.

They don't call me. I always miss them as I live far away from my family. I just have my phone for calls to them. When I miss them or am bored, then I call back home. I mostly spend my money on calls back home. [Single, Female]

There are a few migrant workers who are parents and have left their children behind while both work in Malaysia. They leave their young children generally under their grandmother's care. Their children grow up with their mother's mother and with other extended family members due to their parents long period of work abroad. Migrant parents, in particular mothers, always take care of their children by cell phone usually belonging to members of the family because their young children do not have their own cell phone. Some parents have mature children who have their own cell phone in Thailand and they connect directly to them. They often call their children in Thailand for they are concerned that something might happen to them. They miss their children and want to keep up with their whereabouts and well-being. Migrant workers try to be good parents and take care of their children by cell phone during their physical absence from their home.

I always use my phone, I call my child at home. I miss my baby. Today I got a call from my daughter that she misses me and wants me to call back home. Then I called her back to ask her about school . . . I spend much money on the phone. I topped up my phone account more than 100 RM. last month. Mostly, I call my daughter. [Married, Female]

Some male *Nayu* workers are married and are separated from their wives and children because they had married either non-migrant women or former migrant women who had returned to Thailand before they had children. These migrant men use their cell phone to connect with their wives while they are away. They try to take care of their wives and children and to be a good father and husband by using a cell phone. This helps them feel better while they are separated from their family but they spend a lot of their wages on voice calls.

I always call my wife in Pattani. I miss her and my baby. Although it is expensive for calls, I often call them as I miss them. I have not seen them for a long time as I work here for them and I send my wages to them each month by using a Bangkok bank here. I live far away from them to make money for them. I call her to ask her about her life and my baby. [Married, Male]

According to Fresnoza-Flot (2009), Uy-Tioco (2007) and Hernandez-Albujar (2004), migrant mothers maintain relationships with their children even when they are far away from home through voice calls. Migrant mothers continue to play a motherhood role for their children while absent, by international voice calls or by sending messages.

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<sup>1</sup> A ‘missed call’ means that a cell phone connects for voice calls to another phone and then the connection is cancelled by the caller.

In the past, migrant workers lived without a cell phone. They used the public phone booths on the street outside their workplaces before and after working hours. The use of public phone booths was not easy and convenient for them. Having their own cell phone allows them to connect more easily with their family any where and any time. In the past, migrant workers made a transnational call to the village's public phone booth in Thailand. Some migrant workers called a neighbour's phone in the village to make a time to call their family. Then the call receiver would go to tell their family at home. The family would come to wait and then the workers would call back again. Without cell phones, remaining in touch was difficult and contact with the family was infrequent.

In the previous ten years working here, I could not afford a mobile phone. Any time I wanted to call my family, I had to use the public phone. However, there was no telephone at my family's house too, so I had to call my family through the public phone that was nearest to my family's house. When it rang, anyone who was near the phone would answer the call, then I told that person who I wanted to talk to so that the person could help me find the person that I wanted to talk to. While waiting, I would hang up for a while and then make a call again. For this reason, at that time I hardly called my family. However, today is different. Everyone has a mobile phone because if you do not have it, no one can contact you. [Married, Male]

The longer new migrants work the more their networks grow in Malaysia. They use their cell phone to contact *Nayu* worker friends both old friends, from the same villages, and new friends whom they meet after migrating.

I work here and don't go out, so I always call my friends when I am bored or feeling lonely but I don't like to send SMS as I am not good at typing. If my friends send me SMS, I wouldn't reply but call them instead. It is easier than writing the messages as I can talk and hear their voice too. . . . My cell phone is to keep contact with my family as I live here not at home so I need to contact my family sometimes. When I feel bored or lonely, I usually call my friends here. Mostly I use my mobile phone to call my friends especially when I have not seen them for a while or when I miss them. Anyway, I don't talk much as it is expensive. It is not as cheap as it is in Thailand. [Single, Male]

As well as staying in touch with old and new friends, *Nayu* workers like to contact members of the opposite sex. Young unmarried *Nayu* workers enjoy chit-chat with boyfriends and girlfriends on the phone after their restaurants are closed from 3.00 am until the morning prayer at 5.00 a.m. Young *Nayu* workers like to connect with their boyfriends or girlfriends for romance. Young men make more domestic calls for romantic love than young women. Male migrants spend a lot of their wages to pay for flirtations on the phone because they work a seven-day week. Besides, they have limited freedom of mobility because they are irregular migrant workers, so most of the time they have to be confined to their workplaces and residences. The cell phone can fulfil their desire to connect with and to maintain a face-to-face relationship with their girlfriends. They spend a lot on domestic calls. They refill their prepaid card or use online prepaid services from cell phone and grocery shops which are located around city and near their workplaces.

I and my boyfriend also talk on the phone. My friend gave him my number. Then, he called me when I was at the shop. We talk on the phone every day. I have met him here. He came to visit his friend here and to eat at the shop. [Single, Female]

Katz (2001) also found that the cell phone plays an important role in the conduct of gender relations and enhances in people's search for partners and that the use of cell phone to obtain romantic love among both men and women is increasing as it extends or creates new relationships and expands networks (Nagasaka, 2007).

*Nayu* workers who had worked for a long time in Malaysia in the past did not have their own cell phone as the price was too expensive for them. They had limited opportunity to connect with and maintain their networks. In some cases, restaurant owners had a cell phone which they could use but only for a few minutes. Life without a cell phone in the past meant that maintaining social relationships both inside and outside Malaysia was very difficult.

In the past, I could live here without a mobile phone, but today, I cannot live without it. And I do not want to imagine how to live without it. In the past, when I wanted to contact my friends I had to visit at their restaurants. I was going to their

restaurants for a while. Nowadays, I have a cell phone. I can contact my friends any time and any where here. [Single, Female]

*The roles of the cell phone in migrant networks*

a. The cell phone and the (re-) production of migrant networks

Cell phone network systems link not only two cell phones for individual communication but also entire social networks. Indeed, migrant networks can be considered to be the cell phone networks which arise from individual communication. Cell phones, which provide both individual and group contact among network members, form migrant networks. Almost everyone in a migrant network has nearly all the cell phone number of its members. The cell phone is a medium that helps support communication and exchange of information among network members. Although some new migrants do not have their own cell phones, this does not mean that they can not make a call to other network members for they are able to use the cell phones of another person.

Similarly, in the case of Vietnamese female migrant workers in Taiwan, Wang (2007) found that the use of cell phones is one of the strategies they use to connect with and develop their social networks among their friends and expand their sense of community in Taiwan. In Loveband's study of Indonesian domestic workers in Taiwan (2009, p45) she reported that they have many contact names in their cell phones some of whom they had never met. The use of cell phones among Indonesian workers in Taiwan was quite common and provided a sense of community and a source of information between both friends and strangers of Indonesian origin.

The cell phones are useful not only for maintaining strong ties with migrants' families in Thailand but also for forging links with new ties later developed in Malaysia. Newcomers form relationships at work colleagues and by living together in the same place so their social relations develop and become strong. Most *Nayu* workers do not work only for one restaurant; they are likely to move from one restaurant to another. Without a cell phone, migrant workers would lose contact with their network members. However, since almost all migrant workers have their own cell phones, they are able to maintain the social relationships among their ever-growing networks even while moving around within Malaysia. No matter where they live, they all can be linked on their cell phone networks.

I will send messages by typing Jawi [Malay dialect] to other people when they send messages back to me. They send me messages every day to ask about my daily life. Let me show you [He showed his SMS messages in his cell phone "Had dinner yet" and he replied "Not yet, I'm going to..."]. I receive messages from friends and they call me too, not too often. They send many messages to me because we haven't met for ages. Everyone has to work every day and I have not seen some people for a month. For this reason, I send messages to them. [Single, Male]

Migrant workers in Malaysia hardly ever turn off their cell phones. They keep their prepaid cell phones on seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, to maintain contact with their migrant networks and their families. After business hours, from 3.00 to 5.00 in the morning, is the peak time for calling and sending SMS messages.

The main limitation to using a cell phone is the high service price. However, *Nayu* have developed strategies to reduce the cost. Phone companies have promotions for some periods of time and on SMS messages, and calling those on the same networks is cheaper. The sending of SMS messages is a less expensive method of maintaining migrant networks within Malaysia which new migrant workers learn from their migrant networks. They are able to use free SMS promotions from their prepaid cell phone services. Their migrant networks teach them how to do this after they have topped up their prepaid cell phones on the system. Via cell phone, migrant workers can also send and read SMS messages. While working, they are still able to get SMS messages and to answer back without their employers noticing. They do not often make and receive voice calls when they are busy working.

Despite simple use and easy access, the sending and reading of SMS messages can be too complicated and difficult for those migrant workers with limited literacy in both Thai and Malay languages. The sending and reading of SMS messages is not possible if they cannot read and write in Thai or Malay. Consequently, these migrant workers can only use their cell phones for making voice calls.



Migrant workers, who purchase a cell phone in Malaysia, are likely to send SMS messages in Malay dialect. However, unlike the older generation, most young *Nayu* workers have been educated in *Pondok* which provide traditional Islamic education and basic Malay standard language, so most young *Nayu* workers who have studied in *Pondok* are able to send and read SMS messages in Malay dialect via their cell phones. However, *Nayu* workers who purchase a cell phone in Thailand, always send SMS messages using Thai font.

My friends send me messages every day, but they hardly call me. They send me messages because we do not have a chance to see one another, maybe for a year, and everybody has to work every day too. Another reason is that my friends have promotions that allow them to send messages free. [Single, Male]

I seldom go out because I'm not fluent at speaking Malay. Also, I don't have the work permit. Being so tired after working every day, I don't go out and spend my free time in bed. So, I call my Thai-Melayu [*Nayu*] friends. It's boring always being at the shop and seeing the same faces in the shop. [Single, Female]

#### b. The use of a cell phone for getting a job

Most *Nayu* workers do not work for only one restaurant while abroad. They transfer to other restaurants which offer them a better position. *Nayu* workers obtain almost all their jobs from their migrant networks through the cell phone. When migrant workers wish to transfer from their restaurants, they request their migrant networks to supply employment contacts and employment information on the cell phone, by sending SMS messages and making voice calls. As small enterprises do not usually resort to formal recruitment systems, word of mouth is the most efficient and cheapest way to spread recruitment news.

Raymond Ngan and Stephen Ma (2008) in their study of internal migrant workers in China's Pearl River Delta found that there is relationship between the increasing use of the cell phone and job mobility among migrant workers. The young generation of migrant workers has more convenient access to information on jobs with better wages, working conditions and living environment. This job information from their kin and friends provides them with a better chance to change workplaces and to improve their lives.

Migrant workers in Malaysia contact their relatives in Thailand via cell phone, when there is a job available. If no relatives wish to work there, they offer that position to other members of their network. As a result, the cell phone makes recruitment easier. Without cell phones, it would be much harder to get a job in a restaurant.

In the past, *Nayu* workers could not possess cell phones which were very expensive. Recruitment was done in Thailand when *Nayu* workers and restaurant owners returned to their homes. They sought new employees face-to-face. Moreover, migrant workers did not transfer to new restaurants as often as they do nowadays. If they would like to transfer to a new restaurant, they had to wait until they returned home during the period of *Hari Raya Puasa* or *Hari Raya Hajii* when they had a chance to meet prospective employers and to get a new job. *Nayu* workers had such a chance only twice a year in the past, but at present, they can transfer to new restaurants as frequently as they wish because cell phones enable instant contact with the labour market in Malaysia. Consequently, they do not need to wait for *Hari Raya* for recruitment.

In the past, they [*Nayu* workers] used to find out about a job in Thailand but nowadays the cell phone is popular so they can find out about a job and change if they like. There are many people who come to Malaysia without a job. The bartender at this shop, his friends always come to see him, and I would let them stay and have food and then his friends would call other people if there are any jobs. In the past, they wouldn't come to Malaysia if they didn't have a job. [Married, Female]

#### c. Social support in times of emotional crisis

When migrant workers have problems with their employers or colleagues, they often call their friends who are not in their restaurants. They tell their friends their stories, consult them about their problems, and receive advice based on their friends' experience. They feel better after getting counselling from their migrant networks via cell phone conversations. Furthermore, when they get bored with their

lives, communication via cell phones can cheer them up as they have few chances to meet their friends face-to-face in Malaysia. They need social support through cell phones because there are a few places for *Nayu* workers to party and enjoy their time together, unlike other foreign workers who have somewhere to go in Malaysia when they have days-off. Instead, migrant workers have virtual space on the cell phone networks where they can socialize with their networks.

When I work in the restaurant, there are many problems that make me feel stressed. Whenever I feel stressed, I call my close friend who works at a different restaurant. In fact, I do not want to gossip with my friend who works at the same place, but I just want to speak about some thing on my mind so that I will feel better. Moreover, my friend is a good consultant. She always gives me some good advice. We understand each other well, maybe because we do the same job. [Single, Male]

The increasing use of cell phones is a significant part of everyday life for migrant workers. This paper examined the relationship between cell phone networks and migrant networks among *Nayu* workers and found that the cell phone is used to create, maintain and reinforce networks among irregular migrant workers. Migrant workers are always connected to their networks by cell phone networks whether they are absent from home, at work or crossing the border.

*Nayu* workers decide to own cell phones to make contact with their networks in Thailand and Malaysia, to signal their independence, as a social status symbol, to continue parenting, and for personal safety in case of an emergency. Almost all *Nayu* workers do not obtain their own cell phone before they reach Malaysia. Migrant workers buy a cell phone in Thailand because these phones have a Thai font and they are generally illiterate in English and Malay. For those purchasing a phone in Malaysia, a Malay or English font is not a problem. All of them use the prepaid service system from the same network providers as those of their migrant network in Malaysia because the prepaid service rate on the same provider is quite cheap.

*Nayu* workers connect with their parents, their spouses and their children. The longer new migrants work the more their networks grow in Malaysia. They use their cell phone to contact *Nayu* worker friends in Malaysia. The cell phone is utilized to maintain or create new relationships, expanding their migrant network. Their phone networks can supply employment contacts and employment information. They also obtain up-to-date information from their migrant networks in Thailand and Malaysia via cell phone conversations and these conversations can cheer them up as they have few chances to meet their friends face-to-face in Malaysia.

## Conclusion

Most existing studies are not generally concerned with the role of the new communication technology in facilitating and maintaining migrant networks. In the modern era, the cell phones which play an important role in geographical mobility are used for connection and to maintain social contacts. It is a significant part of the migration process enabling migrant workers to connect to their migrant networks and maintain their social ties regardless of time, space, distance and frontiers. The new communication technologies have been integral to migrant networks in keeping social ties connected with those absent from face to face communication. The cell phone is a tool, like a channel through which networks are built up though the continuation of social relationships. Migrant workers are able to connect with their family and other social contacts anywhere and anytime through their phones.

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