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Digital aspirations

Digital aspirations: 'wrong number' mobile-phone relationships and experimental ethics among women entrepreneurs in rural Bangladesh

Abstract

'Wrong-number' mobile-phone relationships are initiated by men dialling random numbers, but they enable young women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh to experiment with the boundaries of fearful excitement; negotiate *purdah*, dowry, and gender norms; and reimagine their futures. These virtual relationships thus constitute a field of cultural struggle for young women that involves ambivalence, ethical-boundary work, cultural critique and the recognition of social alternatives, and the expansion of aspirations. These processes are vernacularized in women's notions of 'being *digital*,' a Bangladeshi vernacular response to the contradictions of contemporary social life.

Wrong-number relationships, mobile phones, ethical critique, cultural struggle, aspirations, gender relations, Bangladesh

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Introduction

Riding her bicycle one-handed for many kilometres as she returned to her village after a long day's work in a neighbouring district, twenty-one-year-old Rahela accepted one call after another on her mobile phone.[1] She shouted at a final caller and terminated the conversation as we approached her house. 'I switch SIM cards in the evenings when I come home. It's part of the struggle of being *digital*. During the day, men are afraid of me when they ask my advice as an iAgent, but in the evenings, they all want to marry me,' Rahela laughed.

This article concerns the ways in which young women in Bangladesh develop new ethical sensibilities, renegotiate *purdah* and gender norms, and emphasize their 'digital' identities through mobile-phone interactions with young men. The local notion of *digital* (an English word repurposed in the Bengali language) stands for modernity, awareness, and education, and yet the term does not necessarily imply the opposite or rejection of 'traditional' values, such as *purdah* and women's propriety norms, arranged marriage, and dowry. *Digital* thus references ambivalence and struggle over the meanings of women's new activities and socioeconomic roles.

As an iAgent (or 'Information Agent') entrepreneur of the eponymous social enterprise, Rahela and hundreds of other young, high-school- and college-educated women across Bangladesh travelled by bicycle to provide information and communication services – via basic smartphones, internet-connected laptops, and digital medical equipment – to marginalized villagers. Desperate to earn extra income to support her impoverished family, Rahela had joined the iAgent program four years previously. She charged a small fee for each service she provided and attempted to cover her family's everyday costs and eventually to pay for her dowry. Families suffered diminished access to sustainable rural livelihoods, and some members embarked on precarious projects to forge new ones. Cultivable land grew scarce, and young women could no longer count on finding husbands with landholdings sufficient to support a family or expect that their parents could afford the necessary dowries.

Contemporary market-driven development approaches often target women for income-generating projects, which become part of family survival strategies. As opposed to earlier, donor-funded projects, initiatives such as the iAgent social enterprise require women to accept microfinance loans or to invest their own money in building financially self-sustaining businesses.

Despite the significant financial role Rahela and other iAgent entrepreneurs played in their households, these young women often faced criticism from their communities for violating codes concerning women's modesty and seclusion. Women in rural Bangladesh occupy a role in society enmeshed in firm ideas about family honour, which lies in the virtue of the family's women. The danger of losing honour, according to orthodox views, requires control over women and their confinement to the domestic sphere, or their covering with a *burqa* (head-to-toe covering) and being accompanied by male kin when traveling outside the home (White 2012). In a context where people direct intense moral scrutiny toward women's propriety, the mobile entrepreneurial activities of iAgents (and other young women) cast doubt on their respectability. Because they additionally extracted fees from customers in order to provide their services – rather than providing support for free and receiving a salary as the higher-status NGO health workers and government family-planning activists did – iAgents were perceived to be low-status hawkers (Huang 2017).

This article details the ways in which women negotiate ethical positions in the context of new forms of interaction – through their unconventional work outside the home and digitally through mobile-phone conversations with non-kin men. By focusing on the fearful excitement and ambivalence experienced by young women who engage in mobile-phone-enabled 'wrong-number' relationships with young men, we can understand how phones and other digital communication technologies are embroiled in contemporary discourses of moral anxiety regarding male-female interactions and in the ongoing efforts of women entrepreneurs to fashion themselves as ethical subjects. While conducting fifteen months (2013-14) of ethnographic research among iAgents in two locations in northwestern Bangladesh, I was able to follow how women's use of mobile phones changed alongside developments in their entrepreneurial and personal lives.

While mobile phones and the connectivity they implied cast young unmarried women onto perilous terrain, they also provided an arena for women to exercise the critical resources of ethical reflection, cultural critique, and 'the capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2004). As risky adventures that might lead to reversals of fortune for poor women, these relationships stimulated the imagination and helped to shape women's understandings of the kind of husbands they wanted. Yet the intense fear of social stigma led most young women to drop phone relationships before they escalated and to value matchmaking by kin. Even so, their new critical resources assisted them in negotiating better positions during the process of arranging their marriages.

Mobile-phone relationships thus constitute a significant 'field of cultural struggle' (Mills 1997; Ong 1991) for young Bangladeshi women. I suggest that the process of cultural struggle involves 1) an ambivalent mixture of fear and excitement elicited by new opportunities; 2) intense ethical boundary work that includes the evaluation of peers and the differentiation of one's own virtue (a reason why cultural struggle is fragmentary and rarely leads to broader class or gender struggles [Ong 1991]); 3) cultural critique and recognition of social alternatives, which may provide space to challenge hegemonic ideas; and 4) the expansion of aspirations. These processes are vernacularized in women's notions of 'being *digital*,' an analysis that captures the opportunities and contradictions facing educated but poor working women in contemporary Bangladesh. Digital relationships serve as a lens for observing the ways in which young entrepreneurs experiment with the boundaries of freedom and enjoyment, negotiate *purdah* and propriety, and imagine futures in which fathers need not be ruined by dowries and husbands might support their wives' careers.

This ethnographic case engages the anthropological literature about the creative ways through which people engage in ethical self-fashioning. Paying attention to the importance of the senses in ethical reasoning reveals how media affect the awareness, emotions, and receptivity of users and provoke reflection about the complexities of cultivating an ethical life (Hirschkind 2006). People find resources from within religion and kinship to become virtuous actors (Mahmood 2005). Women's autonomy and

self-actualization are not found only in resistance to patriarchal norms and institutions, and their aspirations and sense of ethical self are thus not split between traditional expectations and new ideas brought about through contact with the modes of entrepreneurial individualism espoused by neoliberal development programs. Here, the embodiment of religious and ethical values affords women *deeper* forays into their entrepreneurial worlds and *more active* engagement in processes like marriage arrangements. Mahmood (2005:115) calls these emergent situations "the modernity of traditional practices," an evaluation that exposes the ways in which binary contrasts (in both scholarly analysis and popular discourse) obscure emergent social phenomena (Lipset 2013).

Where this analysis departs from the literature on ethical self-fashioning is in confronting the idea that people form themselves (only or primarily) in relation to strong existing ethical systems. The iAgents conceive *novel* ethical orientations and establish *original* expectations about marital life and public engagement by drawing on a range of norms about virtuous comportment, kinship obligations, entrepreneurial practice, and their own critical imaginings of the future.

This article also provides a more nuanced reading of Appadurai's (2004) evocative but flawed concept of the capacity to aspire, the idea that aspirations derive from larger cultural norms, which structurally constrain poor people from being exposed to new experiences and therefore prevent them from building a navigational capacity to widen their horizon of ambitions. By contrast, through their active participation in phone relationships (which are inflected by the phone's relational and material affordances; Juris 2012:275), iAgents extend their aspirations by accessing ethical and navigational repertoires within kinship, Islam, and their own critical reflection and cultural critique.

After situating the practice of mobile-phone relationships in the broader anthropological literature on new media and relationships and in the context of the South Asian and Bangladesh literature on marriage, I explore how the idea of 'being *digital*' is a Bangladeshi vernacular analysis of the struggle of dealing with the complexities of navigating these new ethical positions in contemporary society. Two case studies show how, through the local notion of *digital*, young women in different villages in

northwestern Bangladesh experiment with mobile-phone relationships and seek to craft themselves as ethical and upwardly mobile persons. First, I examine iAgent Rahela's conviction that only a mobile-phone-originated love marriage will secure her the husband (and therefore the life) that she aspires to have. Second, I demonstrate how iAgent Taspia experiments with but eventually rejects phone (and love) marriages in favour of an arranged marriage, which she views as an integral part of being a modern woman. While these judgments about phone relationships diverge, they are both part of the struggle of 'being *digital.*' In the two cases, the phone and the relationships it enables play a pivotal role in the self-reflection of these young women regarding marriage, dowry, *purdah*, and the shaping of their aspirations. The vernacular term, *digital*, frustrates attempts to distinguish between 'traditional' and 'modern,' as Taspia's seemingly paradoxical ideas indicate.

The anthropology of new media and relationships

As access to cheap mobile phones and data plans proliferate globally, so too do popular and professional musings on the social effects of these and other new communication technologies. Public discourses of moral panic emerge on a wide scale, inciting responses such as the police crackdown in India on predatory men ('Phone Romeos') who use phones to harass women (Barry 2017). These dystopic analyses are balanced by the development industry's confidence in the progress to be achieved – such as through e-governance, mobile banking, and telemedicine – through the spread of mobile phones (Dobush 2015).

Anthropological studies provide nuanced, ambivalent accounts, revealing neither social nor technological determinism (Mazzarella 2010) and neither regressive nor modernist social trajectories (Lipset 2013). The literature on India echoes some of the moral-panic discourse by analyzing how phones unsettle inside and outside spaces but also mirror dominant social arrangements by accentuating gender hierarchies (Tenhunen 2008:530). Young women in North India must relinquish their phones when they marry, and further access to phones follows household seniority and gender patterns (Doron 2012:422-425). In these cases, the phone becomes an instrument of surveillance by male relatives

seeking to control women's movements (Patel 2010), thus enacting what Ling (2008:14) calls a 'digital leash.'

Mobile phones are also shown to enable new kinds of access for women by facilitating natal ties (Doron 2012:423), increasing women's role in marriage negotiations (Tenhunen 2008:524), and transcending male oversight (Archambault 2012:93). Phones can support survival strategies for impoverished women by maintaining networks and summoning resources (Horst and Miller 2005). People manufacture new encounters and search for connection via these new technologies.

Earlier work on literacy and letter-writing offers insights about how new notions of companionate marriage and self-development arise from novel forms of communication. Ahearn (2003) draws a link between female literacy and renegotiated gender relations through the form of illicit love letters. The act of writing encourages reflection on the concept of love, expectations, and self-development. It allows for the deliberation not always possible in person, but which is desirable for self-mastery linked with notions of honour (Constable 2009; Johnson-Hanks 2007:654). Yet this form of engagement leaves behind material traces that differentially harm men and women and reproduce gender inequalities.

The topic of gendered imbalance and ambivalent experience is pertinent to the context of 'wrong-number' relationships, which are explored from men's perspectives in Hong Kong (Lin 2005) and Morocco (Carey 2012) and from women's perspectives in Papua New Guinea (Andersen 2013).[2] These relationships evoke the mixed emotions of excitement, fear, amusement, and outrage. They generate concerns about morally appropriate forms of exchange while also providing women with an arena to experiment in the male domain of verbal play. Yet women are sometimes tricked by men's manipulations, and stories of dissimulation serve as warnings to other women (Andersen 2013:321). Building on this literature, I extend the analysis of ambivalence in women's experiences with mobile-mediated relationships while embedding these struggles in societal and cultural context.

New marriage possibilities

The classical literature on South Asia focuses on basic social and cultural institutions and formal structures of kinship and gender (including marriage, caste, kinship, lineage, and gift-giving). These concerns and more recent literature are consistent in their attention to the ways in which women's lives are circumscribed by men. 'In facing the day-to-day trials of marriage, a woman's key concern is economic security. The contours of her life are shaped by her relationships with men – her husband, father, brothers and sons – who are supposed to provide for her' (Hartmann and Boyce 1983:93). This article shows how women also act with agency within these constraints and seek the ethical resources to reshape their situations.

In the literature on Bangladesh, little focus is placed on marriage as an everyday, embodied experience and lived practice, and even less attention is paid to young women's perspectives on the marriage-negotiation process.[3] Customarily, young women do not discuss their marriages, which are negotiated by parents and professional intermediaries. The bride often sees the groom for the first time on her wedding day. Her detachment during negotiations and her expressions of grief during the celebration illustrate feminine notions of honour (Gardner 1995:187).

Love marriages in the past were uncommon and scandalous (Hartmann and Boyce 1983:83). In recent decades, avenues (such as rising rates of female enrolment in school and industrial work) became available for forging male-female non-kin relationships, which continue to provoke social commentary and moral anxiety (White 2012:1443). Once discovered, love relationships can be dismantled by parents, for instance, by promising rewards to a son if he desists. Boys face incentives while girls find their reputations to be damaged irrevocably (White 1992:100). Love marriages grow more accepted among women and men working in garment factories (Rashid 2007:116), because, parents reason, their daughters can continue working under the supervision of their husbands. As women increasingly obtain new forms of work alongside unrelated men, such as in the development industry, they must reconcile the excitement of new adventures with the desire to protect their reputations.

The earliest study of women working in development projects in Bangladesh occurred in the 1960s, when women accepted work as village-level organizers because of their destitution and loss of male guardianship (McCarthy 1977:368). While some studies show that *purdah* is no longer a determining constraint on women's employment choices (Goetz 2001:107), other accounts reveal negative attitudes when women work in their own communities, such as in the case of the iAgents. Yet women can reconfigure notions of *purdah* in illuminating ways. Female workers in Chittagong, for instance, 'steer the narrow path between innovation and outrage' through deliberate attention to extra-virtuous deportment and professionalism (Simmons et al. 1992:98).

The dream in rural Bangladesh of upward mobility through new connections – forged through livelihood opportunities in garments and development and through acts of reaching out via the mobile phone – add power to the possibilities of 'wrong-number' encounters. The prevalence of reversal-of-fortune stories – in the past through international labour migration and mystic-induced miracles (Gardner 1995) – shapes people's hopes and encourages them to undertake new opportunities, despite economic and social risks. These precedents for rapid movement out of poverty and transformation of circumstances may help to explain why phone relationships are so compelling for the youth. Young women experience the feeling of being open to adventure while also seeking disciplined self-cultivation. They experience the ambivalence of the thrill of passion and the security of kinship, and they desire a safe level of intimacy, explored further in the vernacular concept of 'being *digital*.'

'Being *digital*': a field of cultural struggle and ethical reflection

Discourses of 'being *digital*' are not only localized among rural women entrepreneurs who use mobile phones and other digital technologies. The dream of 'Digital Bangladesh' is part of the political manifesto of the ruling Awami League party and embodies the national modernist philosophy of using digital technology to ensure national growth and democratic principles of transparency and accountability. Not merely an abstract vision, aspects of Digital Bangladesh are increasingly integral to

the everyday lives of citizens. Children read about Digital Bangladesh in their textbooks; they check their examination results online at village-level access points, where they later participate in online labour-recruitment processes; and they enrol their parents in NGO-delivered e-services. Since 1997, commercial mobile services were available in rural areas, alongside the Grameenphone Village Phone Program, through which microcredit customers could purchase mobile phones and rent them out for profit. This early access to mobile telephony has enabled coverage more widespread than found in neighbouring countries. Mobile-phone ownership among adults has risen to over 50 percent (GSMA Intelligence 2014:8), with a subscription rate of up to 76 percent (BTRC 2016).[4] Through the successful integration of technology in education, health, and labour regimes, Bangladesh aspires to reduce poverty and enhance the productivity of its citizens.[5]

The ideas (and ideals) of Digital Bangladesh as a political vision and set of state-led practices have filtered through levels of bureaucracy and taken on new meanings. A Bangladesh Bank officer in charge of a small-enterprise loan program noted, 'Giving information is the best way of empowerment. Poor entrepreneurs are not conscious. They don't have access to information about financial policy, but if you make them conscious, digital entrepreneurs, they cannot be stopped.' The language of digitizing records for the purposes of transparency and accountability is conflated with ideas about digitizing entrepreneurs in order to empower them with information.

The concept that people (and not just information) can be digital entered the language of rural women entrepreneurs such as Rahela. She and other iAgents used digital health equipment such as blood-pressure cuffs and glucometers. They differentiated themselves from the government-sponsored community-clinic staff who used manual equipment. 'Because the villagers have become *digital*, we need to serve them using digital things,' explained one iAgent. 'In this respect, we are superior to the government health workers.' iAgents served as extension workers for a program that sends health information to pregnant women via text message. iAgents often travelled to remote, off-grid locations where, they assumed, poverty correlated with higher birth rates. Yet when they found few pregnant women to register in such places, they complained that 'even these people have become *digital*.' They

employed the term synonymously with 'educated,' 'conscious,' and 'aware,' notions parallel to the bank official's meaning of 'empowered though the acquisition of information.'

In contrast to studies about North India, where mothers-in-law controlled the household phone and supervised the phone use of daughters-in-law (while men carried personal phones), in rural Bangladesh mobiles are primarily used by young people. Older women often cannot operate a phone. They reference their lack of formal education (synonymized with a lack of awareness and understanding), a resource that younger, *digital* women now possessed. They also occasionally used the term *digital* as a critique of the ways in which young people have become 'selfish' and uninterested in helping their elders.

'Being *digital*' is thus a particularly Bangladeshi concept that indexes ideas about awareness-raising exposure to new possibilities. Yet aspiration does not arrive without conflict. The young women whose views I discuss here emphasize the ambivalence encoded in the condition of 'being *digital*' in a way that state and development-organization rhetoric conceals. In the teleology of Digital Bangladesh and other models of the information society, access to information straightforwardly 'empowers' citizens to improve their situations. Such narratives do not account for the relations of power within which marginalized people access new resources, experiment with new possibilities, and face the disciplinary scrutiny of social superiors. Yet in contrast with Appadurai's (2004) notion of aspiration as a capacity underdeveloped among the poor, cultural struggle is a process through which marginalized people creatively engage existing cultural resources to develop new imagined possibilities.

'Being *digital*' for iAgent entrepreneurs did not mean being modern merely by possessing access to fancy technologies and the knowledge of how to wield them. It also meant engaging with existing social expectations and striving to meet them in more explicit ways than their non-*digital* peers did, whom they accused of not fulfilling kinship roles or of inviting shame by talking too long on the phone with unrelated men. 'Being *digital*' exemplifies processes of 'cultural struggle,' a term introduced by Ong (1991) in the context of the emergence of flexible labour regimes that rely on migrant female

workforces. While women in new work contexts struggle over cultural meanings and values, their efforts are based on individual strategies and covert actions rather than a broader class or gender struggle (Ong 1991:280). The literature on women's factory labour that followed Ong's conceptual path (e.g., Mills 1997) extends ideas about how new experiences generate cultural struggle through the development of new aspirations (such as consumption practices), but these studies often oppose 'traditional' kinship-based identities with modern, cosmopolitan ones, resulting in accounts of divided or conflicted personhood among women. Experiments with 'wrong-number' relationships instead demonstrate ideas of 'cultural struggle' as part of women's production of new ethical positions that do not map onto typical binaries of tradition and modernity.

Women engage in processes of ethical reflection to navigate the tensions between emergent aspiration and intensified moral scrutiny. As Lambek (2010) notes, while 'ordinary ethics' lies in tacit practice, ethics becomes explicit in respect to its breaches, contestations, and renewals. Actions that elicit social critique about models of behaviour enable us to investigate the forms of ethical conduct that guide narratives of respectable personhood. For iAgents seeking to cast themselves in virtuous light, negotiation over ethical boundaries occurs through evaluations of other people's behaviour and actions, and women experiment with the potentialities and boundaries of their own ethical, digital selves.

Rahela's love marriage

At first glance, Rahela's comments about switching SIM cards when she arrives home appear to concern the boundaries of public and private, outside and inside, and work relations and intimate ones. Popular discourse invokes these binaries when people consider appropriate and inappropriate contact with kin and non-kin men. In her remarks, Rahela sets up and then traverses the boundary between these opposite spaces through the material affordances of the phone. She physically switches between two designated SIM cards when she travels across the spatial boundary from the wider outside world into the inside domestic space and when she crosses the temporal boundary from daylight into nighttime.

Yet in practice, Rahela's SIM-card switching did not achieve this clear division. She used one SIM card for communication, regardless of her location or the time of day, and she switched among seven other SIM cards for providing specific facilities such as topping up mobile-phone credits. Clients often visited her home to access regular services, such as conducting mobile-money transfers, monitoring blood pressure, and checking school-examination results online. Neighbours summoned her in the middle of the night to their homes to respond to urgent health problems. Her home and work lives were not separate. She mobilized her home entrepreneurially – instructing her brother to attend the shop she built adjacent to their house – and she earned income through her business enterprise that supported personal and household projects. At home, she used her phone to coordinate client visits for the next day, and while cycling on the road, she conversed with her mobile-phone friends. The boundaries between public and private are not as sharp as they may seem, and Rahela possessed less of a divided identity (between the public-facing sociable entrepreneur and the private demure individual) than her comments indicate.

Precisely because of this lack of clear boundaries, Rahela inhabited a morally perilous terrain that needed ongoing negotiation. Her comments about the differentiated SIM cards can be interpreted not as a physical reification of a defined boundary, but as a metaphor for the continuous effort she undertook to cast herself in virtuous light despite her unconventional activities. The materiality of her phone helped her to conceptualize and communicate this ethical labour to other people. Her words reference her internal struggle over the actions and dispositions that constituted an ethical position and the defence of respectability.

A growing arena of expanding aspirations for young rural women such as Rahela lay in experimentations with the boundaries of ethical relationships with men, mediated by the mobile phone. These links work as harmless flings for passing time, as new venues for matchmaking, and as a domain for exploring one's own and judging other people's morality. Here, aspirations are formed and new possibilities are summoned through the act of typing digits on a phone and conjuring the immediate and

very real presence of distant persons. The extensiveness of mobile-phone relationships compels an exploration of how women attach meaning to mobile ties, conceive of new 'digital aspirations,' and assess the potentials, limits, and dangers of these connections.

'Wrong-number' relationships

Mobile-phone 'wrong-number' relationships are initiated primarily by young men who dial random numbers until they hear a young woman answer. After pretending to have dialled incorrectly an acquaintance's number, they attempt to strike up a conversation, usually by opening with a barrage of questions about the recipient's name, age, location, family situation, and activities. Unlike Carey's (2012) Moroccan protagonists, who provide the least amount of information possible so they do not risk terminating the exchange before its full potential can be understood, young women in rural Bangladesh are (remarkably) forthcoming. They offer their real names and life situations. While men are careful not to provide their precise whereabouts, Rahela explained, some ignorant, 'unconscious' girls make the mistake of divulging their own locations. She, by contrast, was *digital* ('conscious' or aware) and knew how to speak with these young men in a morally safe way.

Rahela and other iAgents spent hours every day on the phone for non-work-related purposes while they chatted about random topics with various phone friends. Usually the young men initiated repeat conversations, although sometimes young women sent 'missed calls' (allowing the phone to ring once before hanging up) as a signal for the recipient to call back, thus passing the airtime costs to the men.[6] I often asked them with whom they had been speaking. Was it a boyfriend? A school friend? From where did they know him? They often replied, it was 'just a friend,' 'no big deal,' or 'a nothing friend' (for other types of calls, they gave a name or precise relationship). 'Wrong number…just to pass the time.' Jeffrey (2010) documents the concept of 'timepass' among educated unemployed youths in North India who find alternative means of performing ideals of successful masculinity. While driven by a different set of circumstances and while occurring in seemingly unproductive, dead time, timepass for these

young men and for iAgents sparks a new kind of future-oriented self-reflection. Timepass enables them productively to explore the possibility of different futures and ethical identities.

Among young women such as the iAgents, mobile-phone relationships remained confined to gaps of empty time during the day, but sometimes digital friends agreed to meet if they happened to live nearby. I accompanied Rahela on several of these adventures when we travelled to the district centre under the cover of visiting an NGO. Usually Rahela did not find the boy to be handsome, or he turned out to be married, or he had exaggerated his profession; she then blocked his number. Bringing me to meetings, she could use the excuse that I did not approve of him to end the relationship. Flirting over the phone and sharing one's dreams with a disembodied voice was surprisingly easy and exciting, explained Rahela, but meeting in public places a real man with worldly attachments provided a rude shock that transformed young women's newfound boldness into shyness and disappointment.

Beyond meetings, mobile-phone connections were used occasionally in matchmaking. Rahela often responded to wrong-number calls until she discovered that the man was uneducated or she grew bored with his conversation. She sometimes passed along the numbers of other young women in her village whom she thought might provide a suitable match. These onward connections expanded the network potential of these previously random and dyadic links and generated possibilities for generationally horizontal matchmaking. Parents rarely participated in these attempted matches, for they usually knew nothing about them. Usually, phone relationships faded out, but occasionally girls enlisted their mothers' help in formalizing the union, and mothers might pretend that they had found the boy through their own natal kinship connections.[7]

Exploring a digital relationship

Rahela engaged in one steady phone relationship for years. The link had been forged through the Skype application on her laptop. Rahela had finished helping a client speak with her son (a migrant worker in Saudi Arabia) when a chat window opened from a Bangladeshi boy who had been searching random

accounts according to names he found attractive. They exchanged phone numbers, spoke daily for months, and met twice in Dhaka (always in the presence of Rahela's female cousin who worked in a garments factory). Rahela explained that the young man, Titu, understood her iAgent enterprise because he worked in an NGO near Dhaka. Unlike most boys who did not want their wives to work for an income, Titu approved of the idea. Meeting this boy gave Rahela confidence that she could continue to work and possibly find a husband who supported her.

Rahela often said that she wanted a love marriage with a boy like Titu, from a distant village who was not involved in her village's politics and she not in his. Her father pressured her to marry a local boy, which she was unwilling to do before finishing her degree, and no local boys held a similar educational level or secure employment. She also resisted by referencing a local woman whose arranged husband divorced her because he felt no affection for her. Divorce would damage her reputation, and so Rahela resolved to marry only according to her own choice, to ensure compatibility.

Still, Rahela's family pressured her to marry quickly because her brother wanted to marry a girl from a different district, with whom he had a phone relationship. The brother, nineteen-year-old Rajib, was younger than Rahela, and due to custom he could not marry before she did. Rahela said that her brother had no business getting married now. 'He uses a smartphone and therefore thinks he's *digital*, but he has no idea what responsibility means,' Rahela argued. He had not finished his degree, and he had no income and no house for his intended wife. How would he feed her? Rahela was not keen to support them from her own income. She had already funded her household for four years. All the objects in the house and the construction materials for it were bought with her money. She needed one more year for her college degree and planned further study before marrying. Rahela's idea of a love marriage would ensure her continued ability to study, work, and support her family. Her brother's plans, by contrast, were selfish and would only further burden the family, she complained. Yet his status as a son privileged Rajib's desires over hers. Their father did not object to Rajib's relationship, and he would be furious about Rahela's had he known about it.

Such tensions and discrepancies within the family discouraged Rahela further when her father continued to draw down her iAgent bank-account balance to invest in his stall at the local market. She had been saving money for her dowry, precisely so that her parents would not be thrust back into poverty upon her marriage. More immediately, when Rahela needed money to pay her examination fees, it was not her parents (or her own income) who financed it, but Titu, who regularly sent her 'gift' money via mobile-money transfers. Rahela remarked on the irony that she worked hard, earned well, grew financially independent, and supported her family, and yet she *still* relied on a man to cover some of her everyday costs. She often spoke about marrying Titu but also expressed ambivalence. When Titu called one day to say that he would be posted to an NGO on the other side of the country, Rahela told me that she was relieved because the relationship would remain comfortably over the phone, where she could continue it privately without inviting the commentary of other people.[8] She could enjoy male companionship without physical proximity and the fear of social stigma that might result. In the following case, similar anxieties and internal struggles also appear but they led this young woman, Taspia, to arrive at different conclusions.

Taspia's arranged marriage

'I want an arranged marriage so that I can be a modern woman.' Taspia and I sat late into the evening and watched Bollywood music videos on her laptop. The videos were provocative love stories performed by scantily clad singers and dancers, and the village girls had watched them repeatedly as they sang the Hindi lyrics with Bengali modifications. This evening we were alone, and I jokingly asked Taspia if these romantic love stories were the kinds she wanted for herself.

Taspia objected immediately; she wanted her family to choose her husband, because love marriages dissolve into quarrelling and divorce. An incompatible marital situation would disrupt her work and hinder her ability to provide for her parents and future children. Bangladeshi men are selfish, she noted, and they spend money frivolously instead of supporting their parents. She added that she did not want to start any relationships before marriage, although she did not lack for opportunities.

A man working in a mobile-money transfer business in Dhaka phoned Taspia one day, having dialled random numbers until he reached her phone. He insisted that he knew her number because she had been his customer. Taspia had never been to Dhaka, she knew that he was lying, and she blocked his number. Another Bangladeshi man's initial 'wrong-number' call from Italy turned into regular hour-long conversations. She indulged this friend's companionship for a year while she dreamed of being brought to Italy and sending money home to her parents, until he sent a picture of himself. (Taspia did not have a smartphone that could receive the image, but she had a laptop and email account.) She deleted his number. Now she rationalized that she discontinued the connection because relationships before marriage were wrong for her.

> Listen. Love marriage and relationships are bad because young people start them, but they cannot control their emotions, so they have to get married. But usually the boy is unemployed, so there are money problems, and then there is a baby, but there is no love remaining in the relationship, only fighting. I will not make any relationship. I want to finish my degree, get a good job, and support my parents. How can I do that if my life is only fighting and my husband prohibits me from working? No. I want an arranged marriage so that I can be a modern woman and my children will grow up well. I am a *digital* person, after all.

Taspia's words revealed her anxieties about the erosion of ethical behaviour and her pragmatic determination to live virtuously. Current trends in international development value girls' higher education and privilege the entry of women into market-oriented livelihoods. Yet these development models also assume that the creation of so-called empowered women implies releasing them from the fetters of so-called traditional practices such as arranged marriages and the tyranny of kinship. Taspia asserted a vision of modern womanhood (a goal-oriented future enabled by an arranged marriage and work outside the home) and ethical personhood (a focus on intergenerational-care work) that the architects of women's empowerment programs such as the iAgent model did not acknowledge. The line between 'traditional'/arranged and 'modern'/love marriage is not as sharp as popular discourse assumes

it to be, and practices surrounding marriage index a wide set of aspirations for a good life that could not be bifurcated into a traditional/modern binary. In Taspia's terms, being 'digital' encompassed this entrepreneurial ethical position.

Taspia's ultimate rejection of love marriage was influenced by her experiences with wrong-number friends, and yet it also expressed ambivalence. The men whose digital company she kept had encouraged her dreams of upward mobility. Several of them valued her work and claimed that they were not interested in taking a dowry from a girl's family if she would be earning income throughout her married life. For Taspia, this idea was revolutionary. She had never known a marriage to occur without a dowry or a man to respect a woman's career. Prior to these conversations, she often resolved not to marry at all precisely because of the dowry requirements that would be imposed on her family. Being the youngest of three daughters whose parents lacked a son to care for them in their old age, Taspia also assumed the moral burden of solving this problem. 'When a girl gets married, all her family gets damaged. It is a huge loss for them.'

Several of Taspia's friends had recently married, and their in-laws had required dowries of one or two lakh taka (870-1,740 GBP). The parents were often unable to pay that amount without selling land and assets. When families demanded a dowry that the girls' families lacked, the girls needed to migrate to Dhaka to work in garment factories. Yet there they would not be able to save money, and their moral purity would be questioned, which might result in the dissolution of the marriage agreement. Families also sent their daughters to borrow from microcredit institutions to fulfil the dowry requirements. The basis of microcredit is to collateralize women's labour (as compared with assets) or, more specifically, their future potential for income-generating work, which they needed to pay off the loan with interest (Karim 2011:83). The cost of dowries has rapidly inflated in the past decades, along with women's extra-household work and earning capability. The responsibility for marriage expenses often devolved downward from the families of girls onto the girls themselves. Taspia worked diligently as an iAgent to earn money, and she borrowed from two microcredit schemes, but she wanted to invest her money in a family shop, rather than to lose it all (and her family's house and land) in a dowry payment.

Stories of stigma and shame

While Taspia experimented with wrong-number relationships, she also observed her friends having mixed experiences with them. In hushed tones, they related stories of stigma and shame that befell young women who were not careful (ones whom Rahela described as 'unaware'). While phone connections provide a novel means for young people to interact and imagine different futures, less emancipatory consequences for women also emerge. iAgents said that they felt ambivalent about the meaning of these relationships, the lack of clarity over their boundaries, and the judgments made by other people. They too participated in evaluating their peers' actions and, in so doing, sought further to differentiate themselves as ethical actors.

Neighbours commented regularly that girls who were often on the phone were ones who engaged in many relationships and therefore did not possess good character. Taspia and other iAgents observed their classmates spending time with multiple boys and accepting gifts from them, and they avoided association with such behaviour. Each village seemed to have a 'tragedy' that served as a warning against illicit relationships, such as when a girl's unrequited love for a wrong-number friend led to his denial of responsibility and her damaged future possibilities. Women warned one another not to speak with wrong-number friends for so long that the phone grew hot against the ear. Again, the materiality of the phone (and the heat it produces when overused) becomes a metaphor for or an indicator of immoral and risky behaviour. Because their entrepreneurial work often subjected them to moral criticism, these judgments of their peers and warnings to one another formed part of the work of reasserting their own ethical identities.

Occasionally, girls found strategies through the mobile phone for fleeing unwanted marriages and negotiating alternative ones. Rima married, divorced, and remarried again in the space of ten months. The original boy was found via a professional matchmaker. Rima never saw him before the wedding, where she decided she disliked his appearance. After the festivities, she refused to go home with him to

consummate the marriage and initiated the divorce process. She then began a wrong-number phone relationship with a young man who was uneducated but charming, and she married him secretly to avoid people's comments. Some women said that Rima had erred in jeopardizing the support of her parents, but they still admired her for extracting herself from an undesirable situation by using her ingenuity and her mobile phone.

Due to these risks of social stigma, which circulated in stories and acted as warnings to young women, Taspia ultimately resolved to have an arranged marriage, although according to her own parameters. The young man needed to be well-educated, approve of her work, and agree to support her parents by living in her natal homestead (an arrangement often perceived to be embarrassing for a daughter in bringing home a 'wife-like' husband, but this did not seem to concern Taspia). If any boy forbade her from working, she would reject him regardless of his other qualifications. A separate source of money would help her to remain independent from her husband.

Digital purdah and cultural critique

Although they arrived at different conclusions, Rahela and Taspia underwent similar processes of ethical self-reflection. They critiqued the failure of others to uphold the social norms of the intergenerational-care work they cherished, and they evaluated the kind of men who might be compatible with their expanding set of aspirations. Their home situations (including male opinion) and the constraints they experienced there informed their conclusions. New forms of interactions required new ethical-boundary setting and created ambivalences for iAgent entrepreneurs, expressed through the "*digital purdah"* they sought to embody as they balanced entrepreneurial availability with female propriety.

Purdah, reimagined

The notion of *purdah* (an Islamic and Bengali term referring to the seclusion of women) is traditionally grounded in ideas of family honour and shame. The danger of losing honour, according to orthodox views, requires control over women and their confinement to the domestic sphere to ensure that no shame befalls the family. Yet the ideal of *purdah* and the separation of 'inside' and 'outside' realms (which are a continuum of locations) are often figurative and not totalizing instruments of control (Kabeer 2001:69). In rural areas, complete *purdah* is a reality for only a small proportion of elite households that can afford domestic staff, thus removing the need for women to leave the homestead (to process agricultural products, for example). Jeffery (1979) discusses *purdah* as a 'negotiated privilege,' which is associated with urban elites and is a symbol of prestige forcefully defended by women of high class. Wearing a *burqa* signals status and economic security (Callan 2008:407).

The ethnographic record shows that women's views of *purdah* are complex and ambivalent, neither fully internalized as natural nor fully rejected as a symbol of oppression, especially among women who work outside the home. Kabeer (2000) explores the multiple understandings of *purdah* among female garment workers. Few of them adopt the orthodox view that they morally transgress *purdah* norms when they engage in extra-domestic activities. Most workers see their actions as an infringement of norms but a pragmatically necessary one. Some women in Bangladesh understand *purdah* as a state of mind and argue that a virtuous person is virtuous in all contexts through her behaviour and purity of intention. These women reinterpret the core idea of the value to arrive at a more 'authentic' and practical notion of moral behaviour while simultaneously expanding their agency, opportunity, and movement. Similarly, for iAgent entrepreneurs, the logic of *purdah* becomes a resource for women to justify their work choices.

iAgents explained that they used to follow stricter rules of *purdah*. Some used to wear *burqa*s whenever they left home. Several had never been outside of their homestead alone, a stark difference from their current lifestyles. Once the iAgents gained more confidence and experience in their work, they reflected on the contemporary relevance of strict notions of *purdah*. iAgents' modern interpretations of *purdah*

and its implications for their ability to perform outside work illustrate their negotiations of moral boundaries to assert the integrity of their behaviour.

To iAgents, who did not stay secluded at home, and few of whom covered their heads outside, *purdah* meant having 'a fresh mind/heart' (*mon fres; 'mon'* perceived as the locus of subjectivity and agency), rather than merely displaying physical modesty. Taspia did not consider that covering was necessary for her since she was not greedy and worked hard. The Prophet Muhammad had decreed a long time ago that *purdah* meant a curtain or covering separating women from male strangers, and what remained important today was the metaphorical protection of the mind/heart and resulting modesty of behaviour. A *burqa* was unnecessary if one's interior state was pure. Rahela agreed that she upheld *purdah* by not behaving improperly, being modest and hard-working, and helping people. In performing her work outside, on a bicycle and with unrelated persons, she actively defended her family's honour by lifting its status and preventing the members from falling into poverty.

Modesty in the physical sense, Taspia elaborated, meant nothing in the context of young women possessing mobile phones. In the past, restricting a girl's mobility under *purdah* norms could have prevented the crystallization of male-female relationships, but now young people could develop them from home. When digital communication technologies could penetrate house walls and render *burqa*s irrelevant, how did one cultivate a *digital purdah*? Taspia questioned, 'What is the point of *purdah* and staying indoors when the phone call enters our homestead and goes straight into our ears, regardless of what we are wearing?' In Rahela's and Taspia's accounts of moral action regarding phone use, maintaining a *digital,* internal *purdah* meant cultivating an awareness of the appropriate boundaries of phone interaction with non-kin men. Rahela's metaphor of differentiated SIM cards illustrates the importance of knowing how to manage this boundary. Allowing the phone to grow hot against one's ear, by contrast, indicates that a young woman has spoken too long and too intimately with a young man and has let her *digital purdah* slip.

The role of men, reimagined

Experiments with mobile-phone relationships enabled Rahela, Taspia, and other young women to gain alternative views on marriage and the roles of men and women in the family. Rahela experienced the contradictions of supporting her male kin financially while also being exploited and criticized by them for her seemingly non-feminine activities. By contrast, her male phone friend, who approved of her work and sent her gift money to cover her daily needs, seeded alternative ideas about relationships with men. Taspia sought to spare her father the shame of being unable to provide for his family and pay her dowry. She was astonished to learn, through interactions with unknown men, that the possibility of not paying a dowry and still being respected for her work might coexist. In both cases, mobile-phone relationships enabled the young women to imagine alternative futures with novel notions of the supportive role of men in their lives. While the phone-friend experience was not necessarily for the end purpose of developing an enduring relationship with that particular person, it provided a means of exploration and self-knowledge. Rahela and Taspia gained fresh ideas about *purdah* that were based on their own, internalized understandings of virtue rather than on externally imposed rules about dress and modesty. They were able to negotiate the legitimacy of their spatial mobility by finding validation among outside and unknown men's approval, versus relying primarily on the opinions of family men. By discerning alternative patriarchal positions and formulating a cultural critique, women were better able to recognize male dominance as arbitrary and thus negotiable.

The mobility that accompanies additional years of education, work, and communication technologies thus enables contact with young men but also new sets of aspirations in which goals other than marriage are foregrounded. The pursuit of education and work for many girls is a primary strategy of upward mobility that hedged against future problems, including the fickleness and unfaithfulness of men. Departing from social assumptions that marriage would detract from the bride's natal familial security and restrict the new wife's agency, unmarried iAgents imagined future husbands whose role would be to support the women's own work and life projects. In this way, husbands moved from a place of centrality in the imagined lives of these women to a more instrumental role, thus assisting the entrepreneurial and kinship projects of these women. Although new opportunities to meet young men

enabled women to experience the fearful freedom of selecting their own partner, they also recognized the dangers implicit in shifting practices of marital choice. In arranged marriages, parents are answerable to the outcomes of these matches and are thus expected to offer help in case of problems. By engaging in love marriages, women as individuals take on risk and stand to lose the support of their natal kin.

Yet regardless of women's decisions to pursue a love or an arranged marriage, in the process of responding to 'wrong-number' calls, women's experiential and aspirational horizons expand. The narratives above illustrate how mobile-phone-mediated encounters create space for the cultural critique of social norms that work against young women, the realization of social alternatives, and the contestation of hegemonic forms. Whether or not they develop their mobile-phone relationships beyond timepass, many young women discover the ability to cultivate new ethical positions (such as regarding *purdah*), marriage expectations, and aspirations for the future. Although they are often 'untutored in ideologies' of social change and feminist empowerment, women 'are capable of making alternative interpretations based on their own visceral experiences and cultural traditions. By thus challenging dominant discourse, they expand the space of political struggle in their everyday lives' (Ong 1991:298). Although such struggles result in different outcomes and desires and are fragmentary, limited, and ambivalent, recognizing breaks between dominant cultural meanings and lived experience 'provide[s] subordinate groups with crucial openings to contest hegemonic forms and generate alternative understandings' (Mills 1997:41). Such observations open up the potential for future research to track the ways in which young *digital* women and men are able to parlay their new understandings into fundamental changes in gender relations in the post-marital household and in the next generations.

Conclusions

This article has explored how young women in rural Bangladesh form new ethical positions through their active participation in mobile-phone 'wrong-number' relationships. These new ethical judgments concern their ideas regarding relationships, marriage, careers, and virtuous comportment, which are

vitally inflected by both the social content and the sensory experience of phone relationships. Through daily calls, women and men experiment with novel ideas, test boundaries, and gain instant feedback in a bond that is intimate while also being safely distant and detachable. The material affordances of the phone make physically present new forms of relationships and render women's experiences and judgments more effable. The phone's disregard of *purdah*'s materiality provokes reflection about *purdah* as a behavioural expression of virtue beyond the veil. Dealing with the complexities of navigating these new ethical positions is the continuous work of being and becoming *digital*, a uniquely Bangladeshi manifestation of cultural struggle and vernacular aspirational ideal that draws on national dreams of modernity and progress; development convictions about the progressive use of information and communications technologies; cultural norms regarding propriety and gender relations; and local ideas about education, awareness, and knowledge.

These cases also allow us to extend the literature on ethical self-formation (Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005) and aspirational capacity (Appadurai 2004) by showing how people are able to cultivate innovative ethical possibilities and imagine unorthodox futures beyond those promulgated by strong religious and ethical systems. They do so not only as a result of exposure to 'outside' experiences but by accessing cultural resources from within cultural, kinship, and religious practice in a way that is phenomenologically new because of the phone's material and relational affordances. In the formation and cultivation of these relationships, women are not merely projecting kinship and traditional relationships onto phone interactions, nor is the experience with new technology a wholly emancipatory one that enables women to escape the constraints of patriarchy and traditional marriage practice. Being *digital* does not imply a radical modernist rejection of custom, and it does not entail aspirations for a future of economic and gender relations premised on individual choice and self-determination. Rather, a *digital* identity is a subject position centred on consciousness, responsibility, relational embeddedness, empowerment, and entrepreneurial openness. Cultivating a *digital* self involves an often-conflicting range of desires and experiences and requires constant ethical labour on the part of young women.

At the time of research, while mobile-phone use among young people proliferated, computer and internet access was not widespread. Yet the work of iAgents – as well as the information service centres now in every market town thanks to Digital Bangladesh – increasingly familiarized people with new means of accessing digital information and communication. As growing numbers of people and younger generations 'become *digital*,' further research is required to understand the complex ways in which the strategies of media users to reach out and connect will fundamentally change both social and technological practices.

Endnotes

[1] Names of interlocutors and key programs are anonymized to protect identities.

[2] Wrong-number relationships are described elsewhere as 'random networking' (Kriem 2009) and 'fishing' (Donner 2007).

[3] For India, a notable exception is Grover (2009).

[4] Multiple people in a household often share devices, and individual phone users often have multiple subscriptions (SIM cards).

[5] Bangladesh is not the only country to promote ICT-driven development strategies. 'Digital India' is a campaign launched by the government to transform the country into a knowledge economy. With many state, corporate, and non-governmental e-services delivered across India (Mazzarella 2010; Schwittay 2008), the term 'digital' may have gained local conceptual purchase there as well.

[6] Others describe this phenomenon as 'beeping,' 'flashing,' 'lost calls,' and 'pranking' (Donner 2007; Kriem 2009).

[7] Even after 'real' arranged-marriage agreements are settled, mobile phones facilitate the to-be couple in getting acquainted, which has implications for the new couple's positioning within the joint family (Doron 2012). Gardner (1995:167) documents cases of 'telephone marriage,' in which the groom, living in London, requires official marriage registration for the bride in Bangladesh to join him, so he ties the knot virtually.

[8] Jorgensen (2014:11) suggests that the success of phone friendships depends on keeping them virtual.

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