

## **RELATIONSHIFT: TRANSNATIONAL SPOUSAL COMMUNICATION IN THE AGE OF NEW MEDIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study takes a look at returning OFWs (Overseas Filipino Workers) from labor migration and their overall communication with their left-behind spouses. Aside from the migrant spouse's return, the study also takes a look at how the shift from mediated to face-to-face communication becomes a factor that affects the relationship between the spouses.

This study also investigates labor migration in the Philippines, how labor migration affects power relations between spouses, and the role of a migrating parent to a child. The lack in studies focusing on the interpersonal communication between a returning migrant spouse and left-behind spouse is addressed. More importantly, this study looks at how interpersonal communication is affected by the mediated communication of spouses prior to the return of the migrating spouse.

Data were obtained from in-depth interviews of 7 OFWs and their respective spouses. Informants were first screened using a specific set of criteria before qualifying to take part in the study. As a result, the researchers found out that even if the couples engaged in computer-mediated communication while they were away from each other, there were still changes noticed upon the migrant spouse's return. The perceived changes in interpersonal communication are apparent especially in couples' gender roles and power relations. Age, duration of marriage, and the type of union of each couple are also considered as important factors. The adjustment period of couples upon the return of the migrant spouses is perceived to be the most difficult for newly-married couples. In conclusion, the geographical separation of couples brought by labor migration, even with the assistance of computer-mediated communication while they are away from each other, affects the relationship between migrant spouses and the spouses they left behind upon their return in the country.

**Key words:** *marital stability, labor migration, conflict, media technologies*

## INTRODUCTION

A great number of Filipinos leave the country to be employed overseas. Making personal sacrifices and enduring unpredictable work hours as well as demanding employers in order to provide for one's family are a few of the major reasons why OFWs are dubbed as the "new heroes" of the country (Bhatia, 2013). Cases of separation in families of OFWs are not a rarity, and findings from a study that would attempt to uncover possible factors that affect the communication between spouses can be used to identify and hopefully prevent the negative effects brought about by labor migration to families.

Communication is vital in all areas of human life, including marital relationships (Esere, as cited in Esere et.al, 2011). Several studies have suggested that effective communication amongst other factors play a major role in the happiness, satisfaction, and stability of the relationship between spouses (Fowers, 1990; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Holman & Brock, 1986 Metts & Cupach, 1986, as cited in Usoroh et al, 2010). Lima (2012) also identified sense of fairness and marital quality as important indicators of stability. However, due to certain circumstances, some couples resort to labor migration in order to fulfill their family's needs. In spite of their desire to be with their families, economic considerations such as lack of job opportunities and low wages in the Philippines continue to be the reason why Filipinos opt to work abroad (Asis, 2005).

In spite of the benefits labor migration brings, it also separates couples due to one party going overseas for employment, leaving his or her partner behind. These costs, which include parental alienation and breakdown of families, affect the relationship among family members directly (Francisco, 2015). Such impact of labor migration is not to be taken lightly, because Filipinos are living in a family-oriented culture where the family becomes the source of one's identity, material, and emotional support, and is treated as one's responsibility (Licuanan, 2003).

Technologies available today have indeed helped in alleviating some of the negative impacts brought about by labor migration. According to Paragas (2006), OFWs communicate mainly through the aid of media platforms with people in the Philippines, most frequently with their family members. OFWs believe that they maintain better connection with their families despite the distance and other barriers brought about by labor migration. In the study of long distance relationships through computer-mediated communication (CMC) by Aguila, (2011), it was revealed that computer-mediated communication does not have a direct hand on dictating how a couple's relationship will transpire, although it does reinforce it depending on how couples use CMC's to manage their relationships.

To further understand the effects of labor migration on marital stability, this study is guided by the integration of two key theories: 1.) Walther's Social Information Processing Theory (SIP); 2.) Huston's three-level model of marriage. Both theories help one in understanding how the return of the migrant spouse and the shift from computer-

mediated to face-to-face communication affects the relationship between migrant spouses and the spouses they left behind.

According to Walther's Social Information Processing Theory, impressions of communicators using CMCs build up over time, in a way that matches effects of face-to-face (FTF) communication. In particular, due to the lack of non-verbal cues that would otherwise be present in FTF communication (i.e., haptics, kinesics, verbal behaviors), communicators make up for it by using what is available through the medium they are using. Communicators use emoticons, timing, and frequency of text or personal messages to make up for the lack of the benefits FTF communication brings. New media that enable real-time communication in the form of video calls, such as Skype, allow for limited kinesic and verbal behaviors, so communicators only have to deal with not being able to touch the person they're communicating with. Instead of CMC hampering the development of a relationship that is taking place, it helps communicators make positive impressions of each other (Olaniran, et al, 2012).

Huston's three level model, on the other hand, focuses on both external and internal factors that affect marriages. This framework has four fundamental assumptions. Marriages being interpersonal systems that should be studied as small groups is the first assumption of this theory. Second is that the psychological and physical qualities of one's spouse shape one's individual and collective efforts in order to maintain a successful union. Third, it assumes that both marriage relationships and the partners in a marriage are dynamic. Finally, it assumes that marital unions are embedded within different social contexts (Huston, 2000).

The aim of this study, then, is to determine how spousal relationships are affected by the shift from computer-mediated to face-to-face communication. Findings of the study can be used to identify and hopefully prevent the negative impact brought by labor migration to marital relationships and families. At the heart of this undertaking is the assumption that ineffective communication between spouses can lead to failed relationships (Idowa & Esere, & Isiaka; as cited in Esere et. al, 2011) and the question "How do the return of the migrant spouse and the shift from mediated to face-to-face communication affect the relationship between migrant spouses and the spouses they left behind?".

Specifically, this study aims to discover the couple's perception of the stability of their marriage, in terms of: (a) Marital stability scale; (b) their communicative behavior; (c) matters discussed within and outside of their marriage; and (d) issues on responsibility sharing. The study also seeks to discover if there have been changes in the performance of these roles as parent and spouse prior to migration in terms of their level of intimacy. Lastly, the study seeks to explore how couples negotiate these changes in roles and behaviours as parent and spouse in terms of the gender of the migrant spouse.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study's main source of data was taken from qualitative methods together with supporting quantitative means. Although the survey results are not generalizable to

the population of OFWs due to the number of respondents, the lack of studies focusing on this type of spousal communication makes the results beneficial for future studies. The data gathering process was divided into two parts: the surveys and focus interviews, both of which were conducted in five cities in the Greater Manila Area. A convenience sampling method was used to select the seven couples consisting of one migrant and one left-behind. This sampling method, however, posed a limitation on the study as there was not an equal male to female migrant ratio.

The survey and interview were conducted in the respective homes of the informant couples. The survey questionnaire was divided into several parts: personal information and socio-demographics, sense of fairness, decision-making, marital stability, and intimacy. The part discussing acculturation was omitted by the researchers in their analysis as it was deemed unimportant. The interview was divided into two parts: communication while the spouse is away, and communication upon the return of the spouse. The couples' demographics were also taken into consideration and under this falls gender, age, length and type of marriage, number of children, and the migrant's length and location of occupation. The study's two main variables are marital stability and the communicative behavior of the couples. This was indicated by the following concepts:

## **I. Marital Stability**

Marital stability was measured by conflicts between spouses, the level of disclosure between them, and how the couples themselves perceived the stability of their marriages. The sub-concepts included in marital stability are:

### *A. Decision-making process*

The decision-making process was measured using seven-point scales on familial, social, and sexual matters. The differences in decision-making were also measured in three separate instances: when spouses had differing opinions, when the difference in time zone posed a problem, and when emergencies occurred in the household.

### *B. Sense of fairness*

A sense of fairness scale was employed, taking into account the couples' contentment regarding the allocation of household tasks and child care.

### *C. Intimacy*

Intimacy was measured using couples' joint engagement in activities.

### *D. Exercise of authority*

The exercise of authority was measured by the actions the migrant spouse took to make his or her authority felt despite his or her absence in the household.

## **II. Communicative Behavior**

The communicative behavior of the couples was measured through their conversation topics, the importance they gave communication, their preferences on media platform, and their overall communication patterns.

### *A. Changes in the migrant's behavior*

A migrant spouse's changes in behavior were measured by what the left behind considered to be noticeable behavioral changes in his or her spouse upon the migrant's return.

## **DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

### **I. Problems from Migration**

#### *A. Matters within the marriage*

When asked about the things couples usually talk about in their computer-mediated conversations, the researchers were able to identify several sub-themes under matters within and outside the marriage.

#### a. Money matters (saving for the future and spending for today; budgeting and meeting daily needs)

Couples cite finances and budgeting as an important topic when it comes to matters within their marriage. When talking about finances, both parties discuss budgeting to meet daily needs in the household, as well as saving up for the future.

"Ah...since ang pinunta ko dun trabaho. So, more on finance 'yon. So number one is iyong...unang una pala ah...iyong kalagayan dito. Tapos secondly is, dahil nga nagtrabaho ako sa ibang bansa para magkaroon ng mas magandang kita. Iyong finances. Iyong mga pangangailangan sa bahay." ("Since I went [abroad] to get a job, we talk more about finances. So number one is... well the first is my current state of living. Second is, because I am working in another country to earn more, [we talk about] the finances. The things we need at home.") - Male, 48, Migrant

#### b. Children

Couples who already have children make it a point to include their children in their conversations. Migrants want to stay updated about their children's growth and development, as well as how they are doing in school.

"Mga bata, financial, kung paano yung takbo, kung ano yung mga kailangan, ganun. Pero madalas, pag-aaral ng mga bata." ("The kids, finances, how things are going, our needs. But most of the time, [we talk about] the kids' education.") - Female, 37, Left-behind

In comparison, young and childless couples talk about the possibility of having children in the future.

"Baby at saka iyong ipon at saka iyong trabaho niya dito." ("[We talk about having] a baby and our savings and her duties here.") - Male, 27, Migrant

### c. Updates on current living conditions

Aside from finances and children, couples like to stay updated regarding how their families are doing at home with the children (in the case of left behinds) and how their day went (in the case of migrants).

"Oo. Kadalasan tinatanong ko siya, kamusta yung work, ganun. Siya naman...kamusta dito sa bahay." ("Yes. Most of the time I ask him: how's work, things like that. He then asks me how I'm doing at home.")- Female, 27, Left-behind

## II. Matters Outside the Marriage

From the answers couples gave when asked about other topics, the researchers were able to identify three sub-themes: office gossip, showbiz, and current events. The couples refused to divulge any "private matters".

"Mga kinaiisan naming officemate at saka chismisan dito sa bahay kung anong niluto." ("The officemates we don't like and we gossip about household matters like what I've cooked.")- Male, 27, Migrant

"Aming dalawa...ano ba...kasi yung iba masyado nang private!" ("Between the two of us... the other [stories] are too private!") - Female, 27, Left-behind

## III. Challenges Left-behinds Face while the Spouse is Away

### A. *Absence transfers responsibilities and authority to the person present*

When it comes to handling emergencies, the left-behind is usually the one in-charge of settling and managing whatever needs to be addressed. This is primarily due to the fact that he or she is the person attending to the children's needs. Migrants note that it is more convenient for the left-behind to decide because the left-behinds can attend to and act on concerns immediately. Furthermore, some of the informants automatically assume responsibility on an emergency situation alone because they do not want to worry their migrant spouse, particularly not wanting to worry or add more stress to the migrant's current situation.

"Pagdating sa mga bata, kapag kunwari may emergency sa mga bata, na-ospital, nagkasakit, 'di ko na sinasabi 'yon. Sinasabi ko na lang kapag tapos na. Kasi mag-wo-worry lang siya eh. Ako na 'yung nag-wo-worry. Hindi ko na siya tinatawagan." ("When it comes to the kids, in the instances of emergencies, such as hospitalization, sickness, I don't usually inform my husband. I just inform him after the incident has passed, because he will just worry about it. I am the one worrying. I don't call him anymore.") - Female, 50, Left-behind

*B. Consequences of the absence of the other spouse can be seen in the left-behind's struggle to manage*

Household and parenting duties are usually shared by spouses. But for labor migrant couples, the left-behind spouse is burdened by tasks that were once fulfilled by the other spouse. This extra burden taken in by the left-behind spouses takes its toll on their management of the household. As for the migrant spouses, their role is limited to not only as a financial provider, but also as a consultant on parenting and household affairs.

"Authority. Paano nga ba... kadalasan nga ano eh. Nagtatanong lang ako sa kanya kung ano iyong mga gagawin. Kung ano iyong mga...when it comes to decision-making, more on, sa kanya ako sumusunod. So hindi ko alam kung paano. Sa bata kasi, siyempre, bilang, maliit pa, toddler pa, talagang...ano noon, sunod, sa akin." ("Authority. How does it work? Often, when I ask him what there is to do, when it comes to decision-making, I mostly follow his orders. So I don't really know how. My children, who are toddlers, follow my orders.") - Female, 27, Left-behind

In the absence of the other spouse, one left-behind resorted to training her children to step up and take some of her responsibilities in managing the household. The left-behind spouse tried to share the migrant spouse's responsibilities with the children and make them understand why they need to do so.

"Sa totoo lang, mahirap. Mahirap talaga, so kailangan ng management. Kailangan mong i-manage talaga yun. Kagaya ng sa gawain, hindi mo pwedeng i-tolerate yung bata na ikaw ang kikilos lahat. So kailangan share, makipag-share sila sa kung ano lang kaya nila. Kasi in-explain ko sa kanila na, ganito, wala yung tatay niyo tapos nagtatrabaho din ako, so syempre tulong-tulong tayo. ...Na mahirap ang buhay, in-

explain ko din yun. Na hindi porke't nandoon yung tatay nila, ganun-ganun na lang. Eh paano kung wala, hindi kayo matutong mag-aral magtrabaho, kailangan matuto sila." ("To be honest, it's hard. It's really hard, so you need to learn management. You really need to manage that. In housework, you don't tolerate the kids into thinking that you will do all the work alone. Sharing is needed; they need to contribute on what they can do. I explain it to them that their dad is away, and that we're both working, so we need to help each other. I also tell them that life is hard, that because your dad is not here means that it will not be easy for us. What if we [don't have work]? You won't get to study, work. They need to learn") Female, 37, Left-behind

### *C. Career of the left-behind spouse being placed second to the children's needs*

Prior to their spouses' departure to work abroad, some left-behind spouses have already been working and continued working despite the additional burden left by the migrant spouse. For left-behind spouses who don't have children yet, this situation is not an issue. However, for those who already have children, their parental responsibilities weigh more than their careers, even if they are also able to provide for their family.

"Mahirap syempre kasi there are times na kunwari may work ka tapos a-attend ka ng meeting ng anak mo. Tapos syempre ano i-pa-prioritize mo-- 'yong work or 'yong sa children? Kailangang minsan i-prioritize mo na you have to be absent sa work to attend to your children's meeting. Tapos minsan you also have to be absent sa work kapag dadalin mo sila sa doctor, ganon, may mga emergency. So, sometimes, nag-ta-take second place 'yung work because of the demands of children. Pero noong lumalaki na 'yong children, hindi na masyado. Kasi hindi na gaanon 'yong mga check-up. Tapos when it comes to school naman ng children, naka-schedule ahead of time 'yon kaya ina-adjust mo na lang 'yong work mo to fit in 'yong mga meeting nila sa school. Tapos the rest, wala na naman. Wala namang masyadong hirap na." ("It's definitely hard, because there are times when work interferes with your child's activities such as meetings in school. You're torn on what to prioritize: Your work or the activity for your child? Sometimes, you need to be absent from work and prioritize your child's activity. Also, sometimes, you have to be absent when you need to bring them to the doctor, during emergencies. So, at times, work becomes second because of your children's demands, but not so much anymore as they grow older. Because check-ups are less frequent. In school, activities are scheduled ahead of time so you can adjust your work schedule to fit those meetings in. And the rest is not that difficult now.") – Female, 50, Left-behind

## **IV. Issues on Responsibility Sharing**

### *A. Primacy of the higher earning spouse and the left-behind, reinforcing the authority of the migrant in his or her absence*

The migrant spouse makes up for his absence through constantly communicating with his children through their chosen mode of communication. The left behind spouse also makes it a point to make the children understand their situation and reinforce the



responsibility of the migrant spouse, despite him or her being absent from the household. The migrant spouse also takes pride in still being a part of the decision-making process about matters concerning the family or the household. However, since the left-behind spouse is the one who is in direct contact with the children as well as the one present in the house, he or she tends to take over the role of household head.

"Hindi ko masyadong na-ano ang responsibilidad, kasi maliliit pa sila. So ang magandang ano noon is 'yong mother nila ang nag-aano, kasi 'yung wife ko, pinapakilala niya... halimbawa, through voice o 'yung boses ko sa phone. "Ayan si Papa." Tapos sa e-mail din, o kaya sa Skype na nakikita mo 'yung mukha. Pinapakita ko. 'Yon iyong authority na malayo ka pero nakikita ka ng anak mo ang maganda... 'yong ano ng asawa ko kasi inaano niya na "'Yan 'yong parents mo." Kahit na absent 'yong parent." ("I didn't really [have much of a] responsibility because they were still little. So the good thing there is their mother is... my wife introduces me... for example, through voice, or my voice on the phone [and she says] "That's your father". Then in e-mails or in Skype where you can see faces. [My wife] shows my face. That's the authority that [is present] despite being away, your kids still see you. The good thing about what my wife did is [she says] "That's your parent[s]." even if the parent is absent.") - Male, 54, migrant

#### *B. The sharing of responsibilities and negotiation when differences in opinion are encountered*

According to the couples, whenever they have different opinions on certain matters, they negotiate, especially since the left behind has to make decisions that directly affect what happens in the household. Since couples have to schedule their communication, they have to make compromises and the migrant sometimes has to give way to the left behind.

"Mahirap nga. 'Pag 'yong husband mo is away, hindi ka kaagad maka-decide kasi pag-uusapan niyo pa. Pero sometimes, hindi ko na siya tinatanong, desisyon na lang. Tapos informing na lang siya. "O eto ginawa ko." Ganyan." ("It's hard. When your husband is away, you can't decide immediately because you have to talk about it first. But sometimes, I don't ask him anymore, I just decide. Then I just inform him, [I say] "This is what I did.") - Female, 50, Left-behind

### **V. Effects of Labor Migration on Parent-child Relationship**

Closeness with one's children has proven to be one of the most pressing challenges that confront OFWs upon their return. The time they have spent away from their families, while fulfilling their role as a provider, had inevitably affected their role as nurturer to their children. As evidenced by some of the responses, certain adjustments and a substantial amount of time are needed before the relationship between the migrant and his or her children go back to normal.

"Ah! Noong una, noong una, pagdating ko parang...parang, di kami gaanong ka-close sa anak. So, sa wife, hindi naman masyadong problema iyon. So iyong sa anak talaga, mas nakasama niya yung nanay niya, so...ayon. Iyon. Pero, noong nasanay na siyang nandito ako, tapos minsan ako na iyong tinatawag niya. Parang nagiging, ano na. Pumaparehas na." ("Ah! At first, when I came back, it seemed that I am not that close with my child. It was not that of a problem with my wife. So it's only with the children, because he spent more time together with his mother. But when he got used to me being around, he goes to me at times instead of his

mom. It's slowly matching the closeness he has with this mother.") - Male, 48, Migrant

## VI. Diversity in Decision-making Process

Difference in time zones is one of the many constraints that poses as a challenging aspect of life overseas both migrants and left-behinds adjust to. Whenever confronted to negotiate decisions, difference in time zones may cause certain differences in the dynamics between spouses when settling certain issues or family matters.

For instance, some couples actually find it necessary to coordinate with each other as regards to what time they will be available to talk about such matters.

"Isa 'yon. Kasi noon, noong wala pa iyang mga Skype, telepono, kailangang may oras kami na pinag-agree-han. Kunwari, "O, ganitong oras. Alas-otso ng gabi rito. Sa kanya, ganitong oras." Saka siya tatawag." ("It's one of those. Because before, when didn't have skype, access to telephone lines, we needed to adjust based on the time we agreed on. For example, 'O, [be available] at this time. It's 8:00 in the evening here. It's this certain time at where he is.")- Female, 50, left-behind

However, in certain instances, time differences prove to be too much difficult to handle that some spouses resort to deciding on their own.

"Hindi. Ang sinasabi ko, iyong, halimbawa na...may mga...maliliit kasi na mga desisyon na, hindi napag-usapan. So parang...ang nangyayari, "by myself" na lang, iyong isang partido na lang. Sa case ko, sa part ng asawa ko. Siya na lang mismo nakapagdecide, on her own..." ("No. What I'm saying is, there are little decisions that weren't discussed. So what happens is I decide by myself instead, just one party. In my case, [it's] on my wife's part. She is the one who is able to decide on her own.") -- Male, 48, Migrant

## VII. Platforms of Communication Used

### A. *Communicative behavior of couples*

#### a. Primacy of communication in a relationship

Communication takes the center stage in long distance relationships. It is imperative for them to communicate as often as possible in order to stay connected know what's going on in each other's lives. They have also regarded communication as a way of solving problems together, despite being apart.

"Mga twice a day? Ah...minsan morning. So pagkagising ko, i-aadjust na lang. Parang...madaling araw...dito, tapos doon, gabi, so pagdating niya sa work. Ayon. Nag-uusap kami." ("Around twice a day? Ah... sometimes in the morning. So when I wake up, I just have to adjust. It would be dawn here, and there, night time, so when he's come from from work. Then we talk.") - Female, 27, left-behind

"Syempre sobrang imporante kasi minsan, lalo na sa long-distance, sobrang imporante noon kasi nagma-maintain siya ng relationship ng isa't isa, pag may

problema napag-uusapan. Kung walang communication, baka wala na din." ("Of course, it's very important because sometimes, especially in long-distance [relationships], it's very important because it maintains the relationship with each other. When there is a problem, [we] can talk it through. If there's no communication, there might not be [a relationship] anymore.") - Female, 28, Migrant

#### b. Proliferation of new media as mode of communication

All the informants' answers reflect that they adapt to changing technologies in order to meet their needs to connect with their spouses. Furthermore, these changes in media preference and usage brings one to the reality that most of these OFWs have witnessed the changing technologies over time, and hence, have already been out of the country for a very long time.

"Yung phone during the late 80s and early 90s. I used phone cards to communicate with my family. And kasi bumalik ako ng Dubai so during much better time today than before 'yong communication, 'yong phone and mail. Iyong papadala ka ng snail mail. Then today, during the e-mail era, 'yong generation niyo, napakadali. So e-mail almost every week, not kung pwede every day, I communicate with e-mail especially the free one, the Yahoo, Skype." ("The telephone during the late 80s and early 90s. I used phone cards to communicate with my family and because I went back to Dubai so during a much better time [for communication] today than before, [there used to be only] telephone and mail. When you would send snail mail. Then today, during the e-mail era, your generation has it so easy. So e-mail almost every week, if I can't be possible every day. I communicate with e-mail especially the free one; Yahoo, Skype.") - Male, 54, Migrant

#### c. Choice of platform

The actual experience of communication matters for some of the informants. For instance, Skype (which allows video calls), tend to satisfy more needs due to the fact that it has a visual component (i.e., they can see each other). This is consistent with what the literature posits—that over time, CMC is able to make the couples feel as if they are having an FTF communication.

"Through Internet. Skype, tsaka Facebook." (on why) "Mas feel mo kasi iyong presence niya kasi nakikita mo siya sa screen, not in person pero at least nakikita mo siya. Tsaka iyong bata nag-eeenjoy din." ("Through [the] Internet, Skype and Facebook." (on why) "You can feel [his] presence more because you can see him through the screen, not in person, but at least you get to see [him]. And the kids enjoy [seeing him] as well.") - Female, 37, left-behind

Although some platforms meet more needs than others, couples still use a combination of different platforms depending on the situation and available resources.

"Madalas rin siguro. Kapag tumatawag siya kapag free siya nakakapagusap kami. Kunwari namimiss ako (laughs) tumatawag siya pero minsan tumatawag rin siya kapag namimiss mga anak o lalo kapag may emergency o birthday ng anak niya babati yan. Mahirap kasi kapag ako tatawag minsan baka hindi siya available kaya madalas siya talaga yan nauuna." ("Frequently, I guess. When [he] calls during his free time, we get to talk. Sometimes when he misses me (laughs) [he] calls, but sometimes he calls when he misses the kids or especially when there's an emergency or our child's birthday, he greets them. It's hard when I'm the one

initiating the call because he might not be available so most of the time, he is the one [who calls] first.”) - Female, 25, Left-behind

#### d. Mutual effort to maintain communication

Both parties make an effort to stay connected, regardless of being a migrant or a left-behind. Couples make it a point to communicate with each other every day, even if it means having to adjust their schedules.

"Aba'y palagi! Ano..talagang pag may time kami, pag may chance, talagang we make it a point na magusap kami or.. anything kasi messages eh kung kasi parang ganoon din, 'pag nasa work kami pareho, since messages naman, mababasa mo rin anytime. Makakreply ka rin anytime." ("Of course always! When we have time, if there's a chance, we really make it a point to talk or... anything because [instant] messages are just like that as well, when we're both at work, since they're [instant] messages, you can ready them any time. You can reply anytime as well.") - Male, 29, Migrant

While both parties mutually strive to keep in constant communication, there is a tendency for the left-behind to compromise and adjust more to the migrant's schedule abroad as the migrant usually has stricter work schedules in addition to the time difference.

"Ah, ako. Kasi, dahil um...ako yung ano eh. Yung...mas...kumbaga yung, ako yung hinahabol ang oras kasi nga dahil sa trabaho. Since siya rito...ah, dito lang siya sa bahay nung mga time na yun. So ako yung nag-iinitiate ng call." ("I do [usually initiate the conversation]. Because um... I'm the one who is following a schedule because of work. Since she is at home during those times, so I initiate the call.") - Male, 48, Migrant

## **B. Shortcomings of Platforms' Features**

### *A. Void that even CMC cannot fill*

As exemplified by the statement below, in spite of the features various technologies have that enable the informants to communicate and bridge the gap they have with their spouses, shortcomings in terms of platform features are still present. Informants still crave and long for actual physical touch that brings the experience of communication to a different level. Even though various platforms help them sustain communication with their spouses, the limitations these technologies have strengthened the realization of how much more they want to be with their spouses, enlarging this ever-present void in their lives. It should also be noted that despite these limitations, the couples find a consensus and do not resort to having a conflict due to their physical distance from one another.

"Ay siyempre hindi [sapat]! Kasi...unang-una, wala iyong, hindi mo magagawa yung mga intangibles. Kagaya noong...pagyakap. So, iyong mga...ah, paghalik. Kahit sa bata [paghalik sa bata, pagyakap sa bata]. Kasi, ah...unang-una wala ka. Malayo ka. Kaya lang kailangan mong gawin dahil, dahil nga...para sa, kinabukasan. May mga bagay na kailangan mong gawin sa malayo. Kaysa...habang malapit ka." ("Of course it isn't [enough]! Because, first of all, there is no... you can't do the intangibles. Like hugging. So things like kissing. Even with the kids

[kissing and hugging the kids]. Because first of all, you aren't there. You're far away. But you need to do it for the future. There are things that you have to do in faraway places instead of when you're near.") Like - Male, 48, Migrant

### *B. Preference of FTF, but adjustment to circumstance exists*

Some couples know the importance of communication, especially being able to talk to one's partner in person. However, given the circumstances, the couples learn to appreciate that they are still able to communicate on a daily basis even only through computer-mediated platforms. Couples still feel that communicating through online-based platforms is not enough, however they are still able to make the most out of the limitations whenever they talk to their spouse.

"Oo kasi dalawa dapat kayo siyempre, kung ico-commit niya sarili niya na through these sort of tools, (e.g., Skype, WhatsApp) hindi niyo talaga mararamdaman na talagang magkalayo kayo. Dapat ma-utilize mo talaga." ("Yes because there are two of you, if she commits herself through these sort[s] of tools (e.g., Skype, WhatsApp), you won't really feel that you are away from each other. You need to utilize [the tools]")-Male, 29, Migrant

## **VIII. Stability**

### *A. Marital Stability*

State of relationship, disclosure, and conflicts were the three indicators of marital stability used in the study. Findings show couples perceive their relationships with their respective spouses to be pleasant most of the time ( $M = 6.00$ ), despite the migration of one spouse disrupting the course of the romantic relationship. This, according to Christensen and Walczynski (1997, as cited in Lima, 2012), is a factor affecting marital stability. This result also indicated the level of disclosure between spouses, for which findings show couples almost always disclose their personal problems with each other ( $M = 6.29$ ). The third indicator of stability, the frequency of spousal conflicts, is reported to happen rarely between spouses ( $M = 2.14$ )

#### *a. Marital Stability based on Sex*

Findings indicate both males ( $M = 6.14$ ), and females ( $M = 5.86$ ) perceive a pleasant relationship with their spouses most of the time. However, contrary to the overall findings on marital stability, males tend to rarely ( $M = 2.28$ ) disclose their personal problems to their spouses, while females only do it sometimes ( $M = 3$ ). In terms of conflicts, findings show that male ( $M = 2.54$ ) and female ( $M = 2.01$ ) respondents reported relatively different scores for the frequency of conflicts.

Results show males tend to rate the overall state of marital stability higher than females do, however, females perceive less conflicts within their marriages. This finding is contrary to the results of other studies such as in Gresham's (2011) which state males have a tendency to be less perceptive than females when it comes to determining inequalities in marriage, for females place more value on trust than males. It is also worth noting that almost all of the male respondents are the migrant spouse.

## b. Intimacy

All in all, findings reflect that strong intimacy exists between all of the couples. One key aspect of intimacy among couples is kissing. Results show that informants kiss their spouses every day ( $M = 1.36$ ). The respondents also reported that they always share their laughter and happiness with each other ( $M = 5.79$ ) and always talk to each other calmly during conversations ( $M = 5.64$ ), indicating the strong intimacy among couples upon the return of the migrant spouse. This signifies how the reunification of the migrant and left behind spouses has a relatively smooth transition in order to compensate for the periods of temporary physical separation due to migration.

### 1. Comparison across sexes

On average, males and females tend to share the same sentiments when it comes to intimacy. The difference of their mean scores remains small enough to keep them on the same level.

This similarity goes as far as all respondents, regardless of gender, having the same score ( $M = 2$ ) for the questions “Are you too tired to have sex?” and “Do you feel that you cannot express your love for your spouse anymore?”. All couples don’t let fatigue get in the way of being intimate with each other, and this could possibly be due to the fact that they want to make the most out of the time they have together after being away from each other for a long time. They also do not let distance get in the way as all of them feel capable of expressing their love for each other.

Males ( $M = 2.29$ ) could be leading conversations between couples as they tend to feel like they are sharing their interests with their partners more than females ( $M = 1.71$ ) do.

Males ( $M = 3.71$ ) and females ( $M = 3.57$ ) tend to be on the same page when it comes to engaging in discussions, laughing together ( $M = 5.86$  and  $5.57$ , respectively), calmly talking about things ( $M = 5.43$  and  $5.86$ , respectively), and finishing tasks together ( $M = 5.57$  and  $5.43$ , respectively).

### 2. Intimacy takes a physical form upon the migrant’s return

Upon the migrant’s return, the couples viewed being together physically as the direct advantage. In terms of the quality of communication between spouses, couples note that having easier communication due to the absence of distance was the most striking difference they noticed upon the OFW’s return.

“Syempre mas okay dahil lagi na kaming magkasama. Mas nakakapag-usap, mas madaling pag-usapan ang mga bagay-bagay kapag magkasama. Mas naexplain nyo yung sarili sa isa’t isa.” (“Of course, it’s better because we’re always together. We can talk more, and it’s easier to discuss matters when we’re together. You explain yourself better.”)- Female, 28, Migrant

### 3. Being together is more beneficial because couples don’t have to schedule their communication

Another advantage couples pointed out is being together physically all the time, or if not all the time, one should be within reach and be able to communicate with the other whenever necessary. If there is something they need to discuss right away, or if an emergency arises, couples can easily discuss it without having to worry about their spouse's schedule or differences in time zone.

"Ay malaki! Kasi iba talaga yung araw-araw kayong magkasama eh. Kasi... unang-una, iyong oras na paglalaan niyo sa isa't isa, malaking bagay iyong magkasama kayo, kasi kapag magkalayo kayo, is-schedule niyo pa kung kailan kayo dapat mag-usap. So unlike, unlike yung 'pag andito na sa bahay, pag-uwi mo ng bahay siguradong mag-uusap at mag-uusap kayo, hindi pwedeng hindi. " ("It's big! Because it's really different when you're with each other every day. Because first, the time you spend with each other matters so much, because when you're apart, you still have to schedule when you're available to talk. So unlike when you're together, when you come home, you will surely talk to each other.") - Male, 48, Migrant

### *C. Sense of Fairness*

Division of household work and division of child care are the two indicators of sense of fairness among couples. However, in this study, division of child care is only applicable to 4 out of 7 couples interviewed. On average, the respondents' sense of fairness in both division of household work and division of child care is leaning towards being quite fair ( $M = 1.86$  and  $1.88$ , respectively). Between the two indicators of sense of fairness, couples scored higher on the division of child care.

Furthermore, data show that males ( $M = 2.24$ ) have a higher sense of fairness than females ( $M = 1$ ), between quite and extremely fair in terms of division of housework. For the division of child care as an indicator of fairness, males ( $M = 2.25$ ) also have a higher sense of fairness than females ( $M = 1.38$ ), also between quite and extremely fair. This reflects Lima's (2012) findings that gender plays a big role in determining the sense of fairness in the division of labor. Furthermore, Grote et.al., argue that although majority of wives do more than half of the housework, they still perceive the division of labor as fair especially when it comes to domestic labor (as cited in Lima, 2012).

These findings are consistent with the literature, as left-behind spouses are the ones who fulfill responsibilities of both parents in the absence of the migrant spouse as well as take over all the household work (Coleman, 1998). In this study, since almost all of the males are the OFWs, they have a considerably higher sense of fairness in both fairness indicators (division of household work and division of child care) than females.

#### 1. Allocation of responsibilities go back to normal

Going back to one's old routines and responsibilities, and adjusting to the return of one's spouse has proven to be not a big issue for the informants. There were cases when the migrant automatically assumes his or her responsibilities back upon his or her return without problems.

Left-behinds generally found it easier to resume back to their old ways before their spouses left for abroad.

"Hindi naman. Iyong pag nandito na siya, ilipat ko na iyong ibang trabaho, hindi naman. Kasi ano na, parang automatic na iyong sa amin na ganito, kapag nandyan iyong tatay niyo, ganito, automatic na iyon." ("Not really. When he's here, I transfer all other responsibilities to him. It seemed automatic to the both of us. When your father is here, it's automatic") -Female, 37, Left-behind

However, one left-behind spouse has found it quite difficult to make her children closer to her husband again upon his return. Such may have some repercussions in terms of parent-child relationship.

"Ah...nahirapan? Hindi na...siguro dun sa part lang na ano, kung pano ko ilalapit yung bata sa kanya. Yun lang naman. Pero other than that, okay naman." ("Did I find it hard? Not really, but only on how I would make my child closer to him. That's all. Other than that, it's all okay.") - Female, 27, Left-behind

Migrants, on the other hand, also found it easy due to the fact that leaving the country did not take away their sense of responsibility over their family members. Upon their return, they were still able to assume responsibilities they normally had at home.

[Affirms]. "Kasi...normally talagang pag malayo ka, ang gagawa na lang nun [responsibilities] on your behalf, iyong wife mo. Kung sino iyong naiwan sa bahay. Pero ngayon, since andito na ko, tulong lang kami." ("Because normally, when you're far away, your wife will take over all the responsibilities on your behalf. Whoever it is left at home. But now, we help each other since I am already here.") - Male, 48, Migrant

## IX. Couples' Decision-making

Overall, couples almost always agree in making decisions that concern their marriage—specifically in handling family matters, dealing with extended families, displaying affection, sexual activity, socializing with peers, making big decisions together, work-related matters, agreeing on concepts of right and wrong, and setting personal goals ( = 5.56).

As discussed in the study's framework, Huston (2000) argues "the presence or absence of others can have an important impact on the types of behavior spouses exhibit". Of the 9 marital concerns, showing affection, making b

( = 6.07). This is reflected by the higher average scores of agreement of the marital concerns done in private compared to that of the concerns exhibited in the presence of other people, such as

( = 4.93)

The lower average scores of the concerns exhibited in the presence of other people can be further explained by Lima's argument in the literature review that "social comparisons are made using comparison referents, which are standards that people use to evaluate their relationships" (2012). These comparisons are one of the indicators of



the sense of fairness a partner feels in a relationship. Lima also explains “fairness is related to participation in decision making” (2012).

As discussed in the literature review, husbands manifested guilt and confusion whenever they are unable to successfully negotiate their needs and other matters with their partners (Guerrero, La Valley, & Farinelli, 2008; as cited in Lima, 2012). It can be construed that husbands tend to almost always agree more whenever they decide on marital concerns with their wives to avoid showing guilt, which can contribute to marital conflict. This is shown by the husbands’ higher average scores and tendency to almost

= 5.1) whenever the couples decide on the nine  
= 5.83) have higher average scores than the left-  
behind s = 5.37), in terms of making decisions on the nine marital concerns.

The migrant spouses’ tendency to always agree more with their left-behind spouses, who only manifest their agreement with their partner often, in decision-making can be attributed to the fact that 6 of the 7 migrant spouses are males, while only one of the 7 left-behind spouses is a male.

### SUMMARY

The return of the migrant spouse and the shift from mediated to face-to-face communication showed changes in the communicative behavior between the couples. However, no changes in terms of marital stability rating were found in the data. This may be caused by the fact that all couples undertook efforts to maintain communication lines while one spouse was away, highlighting the fact that communication served as the binding force that maintains marital stability.

Couples find their marriages to be stable, as indicated by high levels of disclosure and rare occurrence of conflicts. This stable perception of one’s marriage may also be attributed to the active communicative behavior they maintained by adapting various new media technologies in order to stay connected. Such would enable them to discuss matters within the marriage (e.g., budgeting, family planning) and matters outside the marriage (e.g., gossip, current events).

In terms of decision-making, couples agree most on the following marital concerns, namely: showing affection, making big decisions together, and sexual relations - matters that are private in nature. However, in spite of these agreements, couples found that some aspects of being separated such as being in different time zones, and the sudden shift of responsibilities to the left-behind spouse, a challenge in terms of coming up with a decision to solve these marital concerns.

The relationship of power between spouses during responsibility sharing was deemed as “quite fair” by the couples. However, certain issues such as giving back the migrant spouse’s prior household responsibilities upon his or her return, especially those involving child care has proven to be a challenge because of adjustment issues from both parties.

Lastly, study findings reveal that strong intimacy exists between spouses regardless of sex or occupation. Both male and female spouses rate their perceived level of intimacy on the same level.

### **IMPLICATIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS**

In terms of theory, the researchers offer a new perspective on the validity of the concept of “hyperpersonalization” present in the Social Information Processing Theory. Data show that none of the interviewed couples prefer computer-mediated communication to face-to-face communication because of more display of intimacy. Other theories focusing on spousal communication could be used for future studies on the topic of interest, since communication between spouses is not only multifaceted, but also relies on microeconomic and macroeconomic factors as well.

The study is limited to the characteristics of the sample, failing to accommodate perspectives from different genders because the sampling schemes (i.e., snowball and convenience) posed an issue on the balance and variation in the couples. The use of qualitative methods together with supporting quantitative means allows for an in-depth description of the couples and how they viewed their marriages in the context of labor migration.

The number of respondents interviewed is not enough to show significant differences in the frequencies’ cross-tabulations. The researchers recommend employing a random sampling scheme over a sample that represents the population.

This study establishes that separation of spouses due to labor migration poses major conflicts not only on the couple’s communicative behavior, but on the entire household as well. The Philippine government’s continuous endorsement of such becomes a serious point of contention. Government agencies and non-government organizations that aim to further concerns of labor migrants, such as the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), should aim to redirect their efforts from making overseas recruitment plausible for Filipinos to convincing them that they do not have to leave the country in order to provide for their families. As long as Filipinos continue struggling to make ends meet due to relatively low wages as compared to other countries’, labor migration will always be perceived not as a threat but as an opportunity.

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