

Migrants and Their Smartphones: Interlaced Mobilities Online and Offline

Isabelle Cheng, University of Portsmouth

Beatrice Zani, McGill University

The increasing symbiosis between contemporary mobility and global Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has been widely recognized in both migration and media studies.¹ Advanced media technology, including smartphones, facilitates information exchange and instantaneous communication.² The pervasive use of smartphones is an everyday reality for migrants; their activities are increasingly taking place online and in real time.³ The use of smartphones by migrants and their families illustrates the different scales of modern mobility within structural socioeconomic and political orders.⁴ Smartphones, and those applications downloaded to the device, enhance connectivity⁵ with regard to transaction, entertainment, socialization, networking, and activism. They help with community building and boost a sense of belonging among people who are connected via various applications.

As such, the mobility of capital, commodity, idea, and emotion is now increasingly visualized on the smartphone. In contrast, it has been less noted that such online mobility does not take place independently of the parallel existence of technological, sociopolitical, and economic infrastructure that is established in the offline physical world. A close look at this intertwined mobility will find that this seemingly smooth online mobility is not only subject to the state's regulation, interference, or surveillance but is also vulnerable to the market's pricing and consumerism. Equally importantly, it is susceptible of individuals' issues of consumption, preference, and positionality in terms of their gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, age, and physical ability. On the whole, although opportunities and resources emerge from this concurrence between online and offline, their constant compression also generates new restrictions or reifies existing constraints. As a result, switching between online and offline modes can cause cognitive, emotional, and practical challenges, particularly if real life away from the screen fails to match up to the lives projected on it. Recognizing such compression and tension between online and offline mobilities helps us explore how migrants reframe, contest, or transform the rigid social, economic, and political orders that constrain their virtual and physical mobilities.

Across state borders or community boundaries, this contrast between online and offline is embodied and enacted by migrants and the people connected with them via the smartphone. The virtual world online carves out a social space that allows a migrant to project a self-portrait, constructed by text, image, or video, to their intended audiences, such as their fellow migrants in their country of residence or their friends and families at home. The size or access of their intended audiences is **set** by the migrant user, and the migrant user's **setting** often is a manifestation of their class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and age in the physical world. The

compression and tension between online and offline can also be found in activists' advocacy and campaigning. For example, those images or videos uploaded by isolated Filipino, Vietnamese, or Indonesian migrant workers became legal evidence downloaded by Taiwanese activists who assisted them in seeking justice in court against their abusive employers (interview, 9 August 2021). During the pandemic, Taiwanese activists hosted online press conferences to voice their criticism towards the government's maltreatment of migrant workers. Nevertheless, they were under no illusions that campaigning online would translate to policy change offline. Without being surrounded by the physical presence of protesters holding their banners and calling out behind their loudspeakers, the government would feel little social pressure to respond (interviews, 5 August 2021).

Taking this compression and tension between online and offline as our vantage point, this special section explores the entanglement of mobility and migration in the increasingly overlapping social, economic, and emotional virtual and physical spaces. The four articles included in this special section aim to answer two critical questions: (1) How does the use of smartphones by migrants and their families generate new modes of mobility? (2) How do online activities and offline infrastructure interact and result in this uneasy compression? With the aid of transnationalism as an analytical prism, our answers to the two questions pertain to Chinese, Filipino, and Indonesian migrants within East Asia **and in France** as entrepreneurs, workers, carers, and self-transformers in relation to those connected to them online at home or abroad. To answer the first question, we explore how the use of smartphones advanced entrepreneurship (Zani and Cheng; Li), the delivery of care (Acedera, Somaih, and Yeoh), and the transmission of emotion across state borders (Wang). Chinese women in Taiwan sold chicken feet from China to Taiwan (Zani and Cheng), and their counterparts in France sold infant formula from France to China (Li) to their buyers for moral and financial reasons. Filipino and Indonesian migrant parents **provided ICT devices and subscriptions** for their families with their remittance, and they were able to participate in their children's daily life in spite of the geographical distance between them. **In time, their children grew with confidence and agency in using social media to interact with their parents** (Acedera, Somaih, and Yeoh). In addition, photos on their smartphones that showed the contrast between "now and then" and "here and there" were a reminder for Chinese transgender women in Japan of their past or the other self (Wang). We will elucidate how **these Chinese, Filipino and Indonesian migrants'** virtual, socioeconomic, and physical mobility was complicated by the interactions with their parents, children, clients, fellow migrants, and host societies.

To answer the second question, we situate Chinese, Filipino, and Indonesian migrants in the transnational social space between sending and receiving states. We look at migration and mobility beyond the points of departure and destination and trace the process in between, as scholarship in migration studies has advocated. Our

findings underline their difficulties in negotiating offline challenges. For Chinese women entrepreneurs in Taiwan, the sovereignty dispute between Taiwan and China, on top of quarantine and taxation regulations administered in the name of sovereignty, obstructed their businesses on WeChat, a marketplace in the virtual borderland (Zani and Cheng). For Chinese migrant women in France, the materiality of the infant formula, such as its weight, packaging, and quality, complicated its transportation. The pandemic unexpectedly “toppled” the reputation of French products, the niche of this moral economy; the availability of direct order via Alibaba, an impersonal digital platform, further nullified the moral appeal between the buyer and the seller (Li). Filipino and Indonesian children, once conceptualized as left-behind care recipients lacking agency, were apt at using the phone and act more independently towards their parents (Acedera, Somaih, and Yeoh). For Chinese transgender women, mobility is a strategic resource for negotiating sexuality, since their departure from China and the arrival in Japan, as well as the journey in between, created socio-mental space to move out of social intolerance in China. However, dominant homophobia in Japan, an offline difficulty beyond individuals’ control, meant that “moving out” did not necessarily lead to “coming out” (Wang).

Supported by these critical and refreshing findings, we argue that the use of smartphones has meshed social, economic, emotional, virtual, and physical mobilities. However, their inseparability is yet to break down the boundary that marks the distinctive and discrete existence of social virtual and physical mobilities. Put simply, the absence, loss, outage, switch-off, unaffordability, or confiscation of the device can easily obstruct this meshed mobility. Interrogating what causes these obstructions, as presented by the four articles, will bring to the fore the challenges posed by offline infrastructure and the embedded structural constraints. As shown by the four articles, using smartphones as a lens will shed new light on how the compression and tension between online and offline is interlaced with different modes of mobility.

On the whole, this multidisciplinary project addresses the ongoing challenges posed by the use of smartphones among migrants and the people in their social network in their everyday life. Despite the growing interests in the link between transnationalism and digital communication, most scholarship to date has focused on what occurs online due to its novelty. However, when the “novelty” has waned and become an everyday reality, as shown by the lifestyle during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a paucity of studies in the lens of mobility that look specifically at the compression and tension between the virtual and the physical. **Opportunely**, this special section fills the gap and underlines that this compression has become a defining feature of contemporary mobilities. This special section is our first attempt to address its criticality and malleability and paves a foundation for future research.

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⁴ K. Leurs and S. Ponzanesi, "Connected Migrants: Encapsulation and Cosmopolitanization," *Popular Communication* 16, no. 1 (2018): 4–20.

⁵ van Dijk, *Culture of Connectivity*.