

Young Love and Texting  
in the Filipino Archipelago  
of Cyberspace



SHHH... ITS ME PUTN A BLANKET ON U  
SO U WONT GET COLD... HAV A WARM N GUD  
NYT SLEEP. GOD BLESS AND GUD PM. NINO.

Nino met Charity at the plaza yesterday in Kalibo.

Although Nino lives and studies in Manila, during his summer break, he is spending time with his relatives in Kalibo – especially his cousin Inday who although a few years younger than he, is the closest relative to Nino in age.

Yesterday Nino accompanied Inday to the plaza where she met up with her *barkada* [group of friends]. One of Inday’s *barkada*, Charity, struck Nino as particularly sweet, although he was too shy to do anything about it at the time. Later in the evening though, he asked his cousin if Charity was single, and when Inday said that she was, he asked her for Charity’s cell number.

Later the next night Nino decides to text Charity.

Picture now a young Filipina named Charity lying in her virginal bed with her cell phone preparing to go to sleep – as most Filipinas keep their cell phones either on their pillow while they sleep or on a night table near by. And imagine now Charity’s phone buzzing as someone has just texted her. The number of the caller doesn’t register as one of the people in her “address book”. She shifts her covers and opens the message from her “inbox”. It’s from Nino, the cousin of one of her *barkada*. He smiled so sweetly at her at the plaza yesterday. Her friend must have given him her number. She reads the message about the kitten and the blanket and feels a little *kilig* [excited]. Charity smiles at his text – who knows what will come from this – and then texts Inday: “ur cosin txt me, did u giv numbr?”

“Oo [yes]”, Inday replies in less than a minute, “He thinks ur gwapa [beautiful]!!!”

Charity repositions herself in her bed and wonders whether she should reply to Nino tonight or whether she should keep him waiting for a few days. She'd prefer to keep him waiting, because she doesn't want him to think she's a "loose girl", but since he is just here on vacation she decides to text back. She composes a message: "hi nino. Thanks 4 ur mesage, its v swet. U hav gud nyt 2. tkr"

She presses "send", and as the message zigzags into the vast skies of cyberspace, she falls asleep with her cell phone by her pillow, and a tiny smile on her lips at the chance of promising possibilities.

## Introduction

Instead of reviewing the recent (growing) literature<sup>1</sup> on the social aspects of mobile communication, discussing the advent of "postmodern lexicon"<sup>2</sup> employed by texters, offering national statistics, or discussing the theoretical particulars of cyberspace,<sup>3</sup> let me adhere to space limitations and discuss instead empirical data about how young Filipinos are restructuring amorous lived relationships and creating virtual ones through text communication.

I hadn't planned to go to South-East Asia to conduct fieldwork only to return to write about technology and cyberspace; yet it would have been impossible not to respond to the omnipresence of the texting phenomena in the Philippines. I began to explore what the effects were for young people, and found that texting was uprooting traditional courtship, re-integrated matchmaking into society, and had the potential to subvert traditional gender ideologies in the domain of young love.

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Brown, Nicola Green and Richard Harper (eds.), *Wireless World: Social and Interactional Aspects of the Mobile Age*, London: Springer, 2002; James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (eds.), *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; Eija-Lissa Kasesniemi and Birgitte Yttri, "Mobile Culture of Children and Teenagers in Finland", in James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (eds.), pp. 170-192; Raul Pertiera, Eduardo F. Ugarte, Alicia Pingol, Joel Hernandez and Nikos Lexis Decanay, *Text-ing Selves: Cellphone and Philippine Modernity*, Manila: De La Salle University Press, 2002, <http://www.finlandembassy.ph/texting1.htm> (last accessed 18 August 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Martin Dodge and Rob Kithin, *Mapping Cyberspace*, London: Routledge 2001, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Dodge and Kithin, *op. cit.*; Chris Gray, *Cyber Citizen: Politics in the Posthuman Age*, New York: Routledge, 2002; Peter Lunefeld (ed.), *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999.

In the following analysis of love and courtship in cyberspace, I employ the fictional characters “Charity”, and “Nino”. The interactions between these characters will act to illustrate typical text-scripts<sup>4</sup> and are based on the précis of interview respondents accumulative narratives, as well as survey, focus group discussions (FGDs) and participant observation, methods that were employed during fieldwork (conducted from 2001-2002) on youth, sexual and reproductive health and social change. Kalibo is situated in the central Philippines and has a population of 63,000 people, ninety percent who are of Catholic denomination.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, this paper will highlight what is frequently ignored in cyber studies: a) as it will focus not only on the study of users “on-line” but also the social relationships that are formed in geographical space, i.e. how cyberspace connects to other aspects of user’s lives – to lived, embodied geographies; and b) it will also illuminate a non-western perspective of cyberspace.<sup>6</sup>

## **Philippines – the Text Capital of the World**

In the Philippines, texting is referred to as the “national pastime”, and is, in fact, the texting capital of the world, with one hundred million texts being sent around the archipelago daily.<sup>7</sup> Although there are less cellular owners in the Philippines than in other countries, reports confirm that the number of text messages sent by SMS users is double the world average.<sup>8</sup> Locally, users are referred to as “generation texters” and usually consist of urban or semi-urban citizens, from lower-middle economic brackets and up, and are often students.

A main denominator in why texting has been so readily adopted by Filipinos and young people particularly is due to its low-cost. To send one text costs a mere Peso (approximately U.S. \$ 0.02) versus making calls on a cell phone (expensive) or using traditional landlines (notoriously unreliable).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> W. Simon and J.H Gagnon, “Sexual Scripts: Performance and Change”, *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 15 (1986) pp. 97–120.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. [www.census.gov.ph](http://www.census.gov.ph).

<sup>6</sup> Dodge and Kithin, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

<sup>7</sup> Pertierra et al., *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> George Strom, “The Telephone comes to a Filipino Village”, in James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (eds.), pp. 274–283.

## Gender and Traditional Courtship

*Harana*, Spanish serenade, is no longer sung out beneath women's windows during warm Filipino nights.<sup>10</sup> Nor are love letters as customary. Nor does courtship necessarily take place over a long period of time with young men visiting young women's parental homes, or during group outings where chaperones are to be present. Instead of travelling to the next town's *fiesta* in hopes of meeting an eligible partner, the vast skies of cyberspace linking the seven thousand islands allow for instant and never-predictable amorous connection.

Also, now a young woman doesn't have to wait for weeks to hear from her beloved – she can receive a romantic declaration within minutes. In addition, in the modern-day Philippines, sometimes women's "beloveds" are, in fact, young men that women have not actually met.

Women in Kalibo are taught to be demure, modest and self-effacing, and, when it comes to matrimony: chaste. In terms of courtship, women are schooled to act *pakipot* (a term describing the pretence of not liking someone), i.e. playing hard to get. By doing this, women solidify their reputation as sexually unimpeachable and also affirm to the suitor that his efforts are worth the reward.<sup>11</sup> However, equipped with a cell phone, women are no longer as apt to remain passive in the game of courtship,<sup>12</sup> as we will see throughout the rest of this analysis.

## Perceived Benefits of Texting

Question: Is having a cell phone important?

Answer: Yeah, that's my best friend (laughs). I can't live without my cell phone.

My research indicated that SMS users found texting to be a superior form of communication for numerous reasons. Interpersonal benefits were cited as the most important attribute of text communication, e.g. vis-à-vis texting: young people gain friends (with anonymous texters or by solidifying casual relationships through text dialogue); nurture previ-

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Rodell, *Culture and Customs of the Philippines*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press: 2002, p. 127.

<sup>11</sup> Personal fieldnotes, 2001–2002.

<sup>12</sup> Pertierra et al., *op. cit.*

ously established friendships; and keep in touch with loved ones in a national economic situation of high relocation and migration overseas.<sup>13</sup> Finally, finding, experimenting and nurturing amorous relationships by way of text was cited as valuable, particularly for young people.

During fieldwork I found that Filipinos send two types of messages to one another, what I have termed ‘hallmark’ (forwarded)<sup>14</sup> and personal (self-composed) texts. Hallmark texts are often maudlin and corny, but there seems to be no stigma or irony involved in sending or receiving them.

Texting offers a roundabout, epigrammatic, softer form of communication than face-to-face encounters and plays with innuendo.<sup>15</sup> However this same reported benefit is rife with potential misinterpretation,<sup>16</sup> e.g. his text of “**gud nyt swet drems**” could be interpreted as saccharine or platonic. The notion of “text-ambiguity” is demonstrated in the following two examples of hallmark texts:

I may run out o messgs 2 txt u. I my run out o jokes 2. I may  
also run out o batry or evn a peso 2... but my hart wont run  
out o space 4 u!<sup>17</sup>

If der r tyms I dnt txt u, its not dat iv 4gotn u. its just dat  
i want 2 hav tym 2 mis u & 4 u 2 mis me 2!

Finally, a major perceived benefit of texting was the acknowledgment of it as a medium to express what people would not feel comfortable communicating in person<sup>18</sup> – particularly amorous feelings. Key in terms of romance – and gender – texting was found to instil personal bravery<sup>19</sup> among its users. When asking one respondent if texting made her feel brave, she replied: “yes, of course. Nobody can see you anyway.”

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<sup>13</sup> “Government debate rages over foreign workers”, *The Post*, Jan. 16 – Feb 12, 2003, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Kasesniemi and Yttri, *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Pertierra et al., *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> *Biggest Collection of Love Text: 2,500 Romantic Quotes*, Quezon City, Philippines: Psicom Publishing, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Pertierra et al., *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Kasesniemi and Yttri, *op. cit.*

Equipped with a cell phone and linked to disembodied cyberspace, a texter can experience a euphoric sense of supernatural prowess. Texting enables many young women to transcend cultural and personal sanctions, e.g. acting *pakipot*, and gives them access to engage in romantically taboo behaviour. Respondents cited: “In texting, I can say what I don’t normally say”, and, “if you are shy to tell them personally, you can tell it through text.” Another respondent said:

At some point, especially the younger generation, guys or even ladies would court through texting, because it’s easy, you see. You can text whatever you want to say.

Like internet communication, texting provides instantaneous transmission of messages from sender to receiver and renders geography and time zones almost irrelevant, yet unlike the internet, texters are almost always “on-line”, (i.e. their phones are on “standby”).<sup>20</sup> Texters can also opt to communicate discreetly from almost any setting and have the advantage of being able to re-read messages, share messages and plot text replies from whatever geographical location – which greatly facilitates courtship and romance. For example, the next day at school, Charity could re-read her message from Nino while in class or show his message to her classmates, thereby re-enforcing the psychological experience of receiving the message.

### **Text Relationships**

Texters form various types of text relationships with diverse outcomes: the main denominators are whether parties stem from existing or new acquaintanceship and whether the exchanges are platonic (as between Charity and Inday) or amorous (as in the case of Charity and Nino). The outcome of text relationships is unpredictable and involves emotional gambling. Text relationships can solidify into embodied relationships, or peter off into cyber vapour. Nevertheless, text relationships are perceived as exciting, with many young women in Kalibo actively engaged (and consumed) with the capricious, and exhilarating world of virtual love.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Rodell, *op. cit.*

Today I will discuss three types of amorous text relationships: potential textmates, anonymous texters, and textmates. All three categories allow for speedy relationship building, game playing and innuendo more so than traditional devices. Texting fosters quick intimacy among its users and enables gutsy communication where those with pens, guitars or telephones would deliberate more solemnly. Also, in terms of gender it is important to pay attention to who initiates/terminates text exchange.

### **Potential Textmates**

If Nino and Charity continued to text each other, after finding out if each were single or not, they could be considered potential textmates. This stage can be thought of as a period of trial-texting, with the aim to get to know one another (e.g. *wat music do u lyk?*), and to see if they are compatible; messages are often riddled with allusion and humour. Frequently at this stage, it is the man who actively woos, while women act *pakipot*. Eventually, the cyber liaison may develop into the ultimate text relationship: textmate status.

### **Anonymous Texters: The Wild Card**

One of the most mysterious elements of texting phenomenon in the Philippines – and intriguing, in terms of romance – is the cyber presence of the “anonymous texter”. Suddenly “appearing” from the abyss of the cyber universe, anonymous texters and receiving textees frequently form relationships with virtual strangers.

Baby, a fifteen year-old participant in one of my early FGDs, talked about her very first boyfriend. She had received an anonymous text, and after five months of being courted by him through text, she “accepted his proposal”, and became his girlfriend. The following interview excerpt is verbatim:

*Baby:* We only lasted nine months. It ended in July 17th of this year. Because he found someone. We’re apart... he study in Manila. I’m here.

*Bella:* But before you became a couple did you meet first?

*Baby:* No, until now I haven’t met him.

*Bella:* Oh, so you had a boyfriend through text alone? You didn’t meet him personally?

*Baby:* No, but I have his picture.

After initial preliminary questions (e.g. usually finding out the gender, age and availability of a textee), or almost immediately, the anonymous texter will ask the standard question: “can I b ur txtm8?”

When constructing analysis using a gender lens, it is important to note that when women engage in text exchange with unknown men, they are breaking social norms. Young unmarried women are taught not to “entertain strangers”, thus by participating in these exchanges women are experimenting with romantic agency and side-stepping traditional gender conduct.

The following ethnographic example [again, verbatim] demonstrates both how anonymous text relationships form and the stigma associated with communicating with unknown men:

It was funny because my neighbour gave my number to his friend. This guy then texted me. I told my sister about the guy. [He wanted] to meet me so fetch me at our church together with my sister. Then he invited us to attend a party of his family. My sister won't allow me to go alone so she accompanied me. When we arrived, we both have common friends. I was embarrassed because just through text I would go along with a stranger. [Note: they later became textmates.]

## Textmates

Being textmates refers to an (articulated or unarticulated) agreement between two parties to continue romantic, intimate text-exchange. (However textmate status cannot be compared to “going steady” in cyberspace, as it is not uncommon for young people to have more than one textmate at a given time.<sup>22</sup>) It is usually at this juncture that women begin experimenting with romantic agency. Textmates overtly court each other, some going as far as engaging in text-sex, although this is not the norm. The following ethnographic example shares the texting exchange of an army captain fighting in Basilan, and Leticia, my research assistant. The two had never met in person and had been texting one another for just a few weeks at the time of the following text exchange. They are now boyfriend and girlfriend in a physical sense:

Captain: nevr dar a ranger, I can be near u n stel a kiss, do oder thngs widout u no'n

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<sup>22</sup> Pertierra et al., *op. cit.*



Leticia: in d 1st place u cnt b ner me and wil nvr b ner me!  
 Captain: I cn bt ryt now I don't hav 2  
 Leticia: Does it mak u hapy 2 stel a kiss? Remembr tho shalt not stel, best to ask!  
 Captain: I kno wen 2 do it  
 Leticia: Com show me how so I myt also  
 Captain: Jaz lyk a magician... I nevr reveal a secret...  
 [Leticia sent him a hallmark message with a graphic of a dancing bear]  
 Captain: wers my kiss?  
 Leticia: Y dnt u cum n get it? Latr, im nt yet going 2 bed. I'm stil her at d prayer meetn, prayn 4 u...  
 Captain: Ur not prayn. Ur thnkn of me

Often textmates grow accustomed to one another's cerebral presence in their daily lives. For example, Charity would come to expect that Nino would text her in the morning to wish her a good day; text after dinner to make sure she had eaten, and then would text again at night to wish her sweet dreams. An interview respondent recalls:

Based on my experiences, you become closer to your textmate. Your feelings develop and sometimes you fall in love with him. That's really true. (*Honey, age 25, weaver.*)

### **Embodied Relationships and Modern-Day Matchmaking**

It is not uncommon for virtual text relationships to metamorphosize into embodied ones (see Leticia's example above). During this process texters often incorporate more traditional courtship methods. For those textmates that have never met, often the exchanging of photographs would transpire (which may be suspect); as would telephone calls be incorporated into their romantic discourse. Eventually, if geographically viable, the infatuated would meet for an "eye-ball".

I have a daughter that marry her textmate. They are okay. The guy came here right away after they got to know each other through texting. He is from Catanduanes, eastern Luzon. At first, I'm reluctant with the guy. But he seems so courteous – he would even ask my permission before he'll take out my daughter. (*Rose, age 64, weaver.*)

Most interview respondents believed that texting could result in materializing of authentic embodied relationships, and is replacing tra-

ditional courtship. Found amongst women's stories of textmates and crushes, conventional urban legends have been replaced by cyber ones – tales of young people finding one another through the strange cyber world of text, falling in love, meeting and then, the pinnacle act: getting married.

Matchmaking, a mostly outdated Filipino custom, is being re-integrated into society by way of text. People take it on themselves to tend to unmarried relatives and friends by passing on people's cellular numbers. Thus, social networks are utilized without possible in-person inconvenience, or geographical constraints.

Texting is also assisting women in finding potential mates by essentially widening the dating pool, as it provides a means to communicate on an intimate level with men who women otherwise might not encounter.

### **Conclusion: Gender & Romantic Agency**

Is the texting phenomenon aiding women in re-appropriating traditional gender ideology? Young women are definitely exploring new roles and identities made viable by the invisible shield of cyber communication. In cyberspace people explore their identity, and shift and play with new roles; to the point that some theorists argue the rise of a "postmodern personality": characterized as being more playful, flexible and complex and often subverting traditional gender roles.<sup>23</sup>

Although this paper has mostly treated the liberating aspects of text communication, certainly traditional gendered rules, which incur embarrassment and stigma, do exist for young women. However, we know that women are choosing to "entertain strangers", accept suitors without parental consent, and men's proposals without a lengthy courting period. We also know that some women are acting as romantic pursuers, and many are engaging in tantalizing, sexually charged dialogue with their text-partners.

As texting is clandestine by nature, it enables secret dialogue away from parental eyes and provides a means of expression where young women do not have to adhere to traditional rules of gender conduct. Texting provides a site where young women can *choose* alternative strategies and experiment with romantic agency without the stigmatization that is often associated with sexual proactivity.

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<sup>23</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, New York: Touchstone, 1995.

Texting in the Philippines is transforming conventional fairytales. Not unlike a Cinderella-themed narrative: the ballroom can be conceived as cyberspace, where instead of dancing, Cinderella and the Prince text one another. The fit of the glass slipper can be compared to text skill. The fairy godmother can be envisioned as technology; the evil step-mother, the cost of pre-paid calling cards; and the three evil step-sisters: a stolen phone, a faulty SIM card, and no signal.

