

## Chapter 7

# Dating Apps as Digital Flyovers: Mobile Media and Global Intimacies in a Postcolonial City

Jason Vincent A. Cabañes

Christianne F. Collantes

*De La Salle University—Manila, Philippines*

### Non-formatted print version.

#### Original citation

Cabañes, JVA and Collantes CF (2020) Dating apps as digital flyovers: Mobile media and global intimacies in a postcolonial city. In JVA Cabañes and CS Uy-Tioco (eds) *Mobile Media and Social Intimacies in Asia*. Dordrecht: Springer. DOI. 10.1007/978-94-024-1790-6\_7

#### Abstract

*This chapter is about middle-class millennial Filipino women and their experiences of mediated global intimacies in the Philippines postcolonial capital of Manila. It focuses on their use of mobile technologies in exploring relationships with foreign men, and Westerners particularly. Drawing on an 18-month ethnographic research, this chapter sheds light on how the women use mobile apps to enact a distinct and temporary resolution to the challenges of experiencing global intimacies in a postcolonial city. Specifically, they construct what we call ‘digital flyovers’, that is, digital infrastructures borne out of dating apps and other mobile media that allow them to bypass what they think to be ‘uncosmopolitan’ Filipino men and to connect with foreign romantic prospects who share their own ‘globalised’ backgrounds and sensibilities. We show that, on one hand, these digital flyovers demonstrate how the women do have the privilege of accessing spaces conducive to cosmopolitan global intimacies, something that is elusive for most people in the Philippines. We also underscore, on the other hand, that these digital flyovers do nothing to change the ‘foundations’ of the society beneath them, which means that middle-class Manila’s distinct social dynamics continue to persist in their romantic and sexual lives.*

#### Keywords

Postcolonial city · Millennials · Cross-cultural relationships · Digital intimacy · Dating apps

### 7.1 Introduction

‘When you know, you know!’, Erika texted us. Even if it was just a mobile phone message, her excitement was palpable. Perhaps this was because her 27 years of experiences had taught her that even in today’s world of mobile media and dating apps, the road to finding ‘The One’ is not necessarily easy. So, when a

Tinder date Erika almost blew off during a New York trip for her digital marketing job blossomed into a full-blown beautiful transcontinental romance, she could not help but share her joy. She told us that this guy—whom she was just supposed to meet for a quick 15 minutes in between the end of a Broadway play and her subway ride to her hotel—had not only booked a flight to visit her in the Philippine capital of Metropolitan Manila (henceforth, Manila). This guy was also now her fiancé. Erika would take a much longer time revealing this news to many of her family and friends, however. ‘I don’t like how judgmental people in this city can be,’ she said. ‘Imagine what they’ll say. He’s a foreigner. Plus, we met on Tinder’.

Like Erika, the 14 other middle-class millennial Filipino women we got to know during our 18-month fieldwork in Manila were all at the forefront of the intensifying ‘globalisation of intimacy’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2014). Not only did they live in a 12-million strong postcolonial capital with a distinct and longstanding history of cultural diversity (Connaughton et al. 1995; Irving 2010; Wilson 2004). They were also in the ‘social media capital of the world’ where mobile phones accounted for 67% of people’s online access, higher than the global average of 42% (We Are Social 2018). All of them had indeed used dating apps and other mobile media to explore the possibility of having relationships with so-called AFAMs (a colloquial term that is the abbreviation of ‘a foreigner assigned to Manila’ or ‘a foreigner around Manila’) (De Leon 2017). And for most of the women, this was because of their exasperation with what they described as the conservatism of most Filipino men, many of whom still subscribed to more traditional prescriptions of Filipino femininity. For these men, the ideal woman should be docile, passive, and possess a sexuality that is conveniently obtainable but non-threatening. As Cate de Leon (2017) explains in her personal essay for *Philstar Global*, many Filipino men in Manila tend to search for sexually available women, ‘...but sleep with them too early, and many will lose respect for you’.

The women in Manila, in the Philippines in general, and in East/Southeast Asia more broadly are no strangers to the complexities of cross-cultural affairs. Much has been written about the long and complicated history of these women’s intimate relationships with foreigners, and especially about how these have been imbricated in problematically gendered, raced, and classed transnational power dynamics (Jones and Shen 2008; Loos 2008; Constable 2003, 2010; Parreñas 2011; Hiew et al. 2015). In the Philippines particularly, much of the scholarship has been on lower class Filipino women’s encounters with foreigners looking for what they euphemistically refer to as a ‘good time’ or a ‘good wife’ (for example, Roces 2000; Tadiar 2004; Angeles and Sunanta 2007). This is, of course, understandable, especially since the sex tourism of women and children in the Philippines continues to plague the country (Duerr 2015; Tacon 2015; Tubeza 2011). The phenomenon of mail-order brides and its other contemporary forms continue to be popular as well (Saroca 1997; Constable 2003; Faier 2009; Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau 2013). We return to this theme later on in this chapter. But here, what we want to highlight is that there is also a growing number of middle-class East/Southeast Asian women—the Filipino women in our study

included—whose social positioning enables them to imagine a different kind of intimate relationship with foreigners. With their university degrees, professional careers, world travels, and cosmopolitan sensibilities, they are hopeful that their relationships can work to subvert the earlier mentioned transnational power dynamics (Pananakhonsab 2016; Parker and Dales 2014).

This chapter focuses specifically on how dating apps and other mobile media matter in middle-class millennial Filipino women's attempts at finding global intimacies in Manila. Through this empirical anchor, it aims to contribute to two key sets of scholarship. For one, this chapter helps nuance the literature on the global intimacies of such middle-class East/Southeast Asian women by attending to not just the online dimension of these relationships (for example, Pananakhonsab 2016), but to their mobile mediated quality as well. It pays particular attention to whether and how dating apps and other mobile media have allowed Filipino women to materialise the kind of global intimacies that they desire (see Miller and Sinanan 2014). It looks into the ways in which they use these technologies to try to sustain an environment where there is a ready opportunity for them to connect with desirable foreigners in Manila and beyond. This is especially in light of how many of the women in our study were of the belief that the rise of mobile media and dating apps helped them maximise what they felt was an increasing diversity of foreigners in the city (see Albay 2017; Gonzales 2017). Beyond the still-present dirty old foreign men (DOMs), there were, amongst others, professional managers leading many of the ever-mushrooming digital upstart offices, social entrepreneurs excited at the possibilities of an emerging economy, and intrepid backpackers finally discovering the Philippines trail (see Chua 2017; Lim 2015; Puhm 2017).

At the same time, this chapter also deepens the literature on mediated intimacies that usefully reminds us that digital dating continues to be imbricated in gendered, raced, and classed social dynamics (for example, Cabrera 2007; Saroca 2012; Tsunokai et al. 2014). It complicates the discussion of such intimacies by zeroing in on the unique ways in which the affordances of dating apps and mobile media might be differently harnessed in a global South context (see David and Cambre 2016; Hobbs et al. 2017; Schrock 2015). This is because in Manila, cross-cultural kinds of digital dating become entwined in the city's distinctly postcolonial imaginaries of social hierarchies and intimacies (see Cabañes 2014, 2019; Collantes 2018). This point is particularly salient since the women in our study did share that their mix of dating apps and mobile media was premised on conscious strategies of social exclusion. Depending on their intent, they prioritised Bumble or Tinder or some other app to make it easier for them to find the kind of men they found desirable as well as to make themselves desirable to these men (see Gamboa 2019; Rappler Social Media Team 2015).

To reiterate, this chapter examines how middle-class millennial Filipino women use dating apps and other mobile media in exploring relationships with foreign men. It assesses the degree to which they are able to use such technologies to materialise the kind of global intimacies that they desire. And in so doing, it also sheds light on

the degree to which their relationships continue to be entwined with Manila's distinct brand of postcolonial imaginaries of social hierarchies and intimacies. As a way of conceptually describing the mediated dynamics of global intimacies that we observed, we propose the notion of dating apps as 'digital flyovers'. We explain this in the next section.

## **7.2 Conceptualising the Mediation of Global Intimacies in a Postcolonial City**

In talking about dating apps as 'digital flyovers', this chapter builds on two existing ideas. One is Neferti Tadiar's (2004) metaphor of the Manila flyover that soars past the heavy on-ground traffic in order to connect the city's centres of capital. In Tadiar's work, she elucidates on the nationalist and postcolonial capitalist logics that continue to dominate the Philippines state. Within this discussion, she contends that as an urban infrastructure, the flyover symbolises the attempt of the country's middle and upper classes to keep the liquid flows of transnational capital going in the midst of the gridlock of local labour. Parallel to this, we contend that the notion of dating apps as flyovers is also driven by such transnational and cosmopolitan desires, but this time expressed through mediated gender relations. This is because Manila's middle-class millennial Filipino women seek to use dating apps and other mobile media to bypass 'uncosmopolitan' Filipino men and to connect with foreign romantic prospects that share their own 'globalised' backgrounds and sensibilities.

The other idea in which 'dating apps as digital flyovers' is anchored is the work that one of us has done on ICTs as a 'temporary resolution' (Cabañes 2019). This pertains to how individuals can use technologies to create digital infrastructures that mitigate, even if only momentarily, the many challenges of doing global intimacies, especially when these go against a society's traditional cultural norms. The earlier study discussed how Manila's Punjabi migrant youth harnessed mobile media to enact 'digital barriers' that tenuously shielded their bold explorations of cross-cultural intimacies from their cultural community's traditional demands surrounding arranged marriages. In the same vein, we attend to the vulnerability of dating apps as digital flyovers. Dating apps and other mobile media do open up Manila's middle-class millennial Filipino women to the cosmopolitan experience of meeting diverse foreigners. At the same time, however, these technologies also expose these women to the dangers of the very same foreigners mapping onto them their exoticised and racialised assumptions and desires.

In the rest of this section, we define the social and technological dynamics that are central to understanding how Manila's middle-class millennial Filipino women enact digital flyovers in their intimate affairs with foreigners. First is that even if the increasing intensity of global intimacy in Manila is contemporary, its distinct inflection is very much shaped by the city's long-standing social dynamics surrounding intimate relationships. The second thing is that while the affordances of dating apps and other mobile media can enable the women in this study to shape

their global intimacies, these technologies nevertheless tend to have contradictory consequences for their relationships.

### ***7.2.1 Global Intimacies and the Postcolonial City***

The drive for Manila's middle-class millennial Filipino women to use dating apps and other mobile media to enact digital flyovers should be understood in relation to how they are navigating through and attempting to break away from what De Leon (2017) terms as 'Manila's confines', which are comprised of the limitations of dating within rigid social class lines and having to still subscribe to conservative practices of sex, dating, and intimacy. This involves nearly unbending expectations of middle-class Filipino women in Manila to perform and adhere to their higher social status, whilst also following more traditional sexual norms. The women in this study are pressured to do this in a postcolonial city whose religio-cultural landscape is still significantly Roman Catholic and is still divided by socio-economic fault lines (Cornelio 2016; Hau 2017). But as we discuss later on in this chapter, what they want are relationships based on the idea of modern romance. This means having relationships that are about individual choice versus social scripts as well as an attraction rooted in emotional intimacy, psychological compatibility, and, crucially, sex appeal (Illouz 2012). Equally important, this means having a stance towards sexual relations that are framed less by traditional ideas of heteronormativity and more by an ethics of 'erotic pluralism' and 'ethical tolerance' (see Giddens 1992). Within this context, the connection with foreign men that digital flyovers allow can be seen as a way to bypass some of Manila's social and cultural rigidities and to experience more cosmopolitan forms of intimacy.

As mentioned in the introduction, however, the trend of Filipino women making connections or having intimate encounters with foreigners is hardly new, especially in postcolonial and continually globalising Manila. These encounters have been part of a political and economic history that has largely contributed to the ways in which Filipino women themselves have become racial and gendered stereotypes even on a transnational scale. Crucial to this history is the country's colonial past and the residues of the American Occupation from 1898 to 1946. This period saw the establishment of military bases on several parts of the islands, state sponsored sex tourism, and large-scale overseas migration (Jeffreys 1999; Chant 2005; Tadiar 2004). As side effects of these complex national and transnational processes, several Filipino women participated—whether willingly or unwillingly—as sexual servants, mail-order brides, and even marriage migrants with foreigners both locally and overseas (Tolentino 2001; Constable 2003; So 2006).

Over time, the Philippines became a site for globalised intimacies in such a way that allowed these sexual and intimate transactions to also help construct and perpetuate stereotypes of Filipino women as being 'passive, demure, shy, desirous of monogamy and family-oriented while being also sexually voracious but with an aim to please men' (Peracullo 2014, p. 15). In her work on internet dating between Filipino women and Australian men, for instance, Saroca (2012) addresses the

ways in which, 'racist and sexist stereotyping of Filipino women as so called "mail-order brides—exotic, poor, submissive women and/or opportunistic gold-diggers who use men as "passports"' was still 'pervasive in the media and other popular discourse' (p. 55). In *Mic.com*, Chelsea Hawkins (2015) even reports on how these dynamics continue to prevail in more recent forms of digital dating. She uncovers the ways in which Asian women are actually quite popular on online dating sites, but mainly because of the racial, fetishist desires of non-Asian men:

The tendency of non-Asian men to fetishize Asian women, lusting after their 'exotic' appeal or assigning them offensive stereotypes, has turned online dating for Asian women into a minefield of unwanted sexual advances and problematic questions. It's behavior experienced by many minority groups online, whether it's transgender women, black women or lesbians. Asian women are a particularly notable example, and it has a name: 'yellow fever.' (Hawkins 2015)

Although such notions towards Filipino women still persist in cross-cultural, transnational, and globalised intimate relationships (either through or without the use of mobile technology and the internet), the interactions between these women and their foreign counterparts in places such as Manila actually indicate a more complex picture of gendered power relations and women's agency.

The recent works of several scholars present how Asian women can undermine the power dynamics that accompany the racial and sexual stereotypes prescribed to them throughout the years (Saroca 2012; Peracullo 2014, Pananakhonsab 2016). In *Love and Intimacy in Online Cross-Cultural Relationships* (2016), Wilasinee Pananakhonsab talks about 'better-educated, higher-class Thai women who possess more power in negotiating with their prospective Western partners and who seek to strike a balance between economic considerations and love/intimacy' (p. 5). This trend subverts the premise that only lower class 'Third World' women seek companionship and intimacy from wealthier, Western men in hopes to achieve higher economic standing. It instead introduces the idea that women from the global South can also aspire for relationships that are rooted in the abovementioned idea of modern romance.

In line with the above, this chapters foregrounds the ways in which Manila's middle-class Filipino women are able to negotiate with and even invalidate such stereotypes. And it is within this that we situate their enactment of digital flyovers that enable them to search for more subversive and cosmopolitan romantic and sexual interactions in the city. But even then, we also recognise that the racial, classed, and sexualized prescriptions of Filipino or 'Third World women' projected onto them by foreigners or expatriates are still well-entrenched. Their global intimacies thus remain characterised by the frictions between these two realities.

### **7.2.2 Global Intimacies, Dating Apps, and Other Mobile Media**

Equally crucial to understanding the digital flyovers created by Manila's middle-class millennial Filipino women are the communicative opportunities that dating

apps and other mobile media afford them. A useful starting point for this is to acknowledge their abundant and ready access to a wide range of information and communication technologies (ICTs). This is something that stands in stark contrast to the majority of Filipinos, who only have ‘good enough access’ to most ICTs (Uy-Tioco 2019). Not only do the women in this study possess the economic capital to purchase mobile technologies and services, they also possess the cultural capital to maximise the social uses of these. Consequently, the communicative environment in which the mobile dating of these Filipino women occurs epitomises the concept of ‘polymedia’ (Madianou and Miller 2012). What they have is a truly “integrated structure” within which each individual medium is defined in relational terms in the context of all other media’ (Madianou and Miller 2012, p. 170). Consistent with a polymedia approach to interpersonal communications technologies then, we pay attention not to the individual constraints of the various dating apps and other mobile media, but to the social and emotional consequences of how the women deploy their particular affordances vis-à-vis other ICTs.

To help us identify how mobile media matter in the global intimacies of the women in our study, we turn to the concept of ‘communicative affordances’ (Schrock 2015). Based on a decade of literature about mobile communication, Andrew Schrock presents a typology of ways in which such technologies enable individuals to shape the quality of their relationships. They are: (1) portability, or how one can, over extended periods of time, transport and physically carry mobile devices, (2) availability, or how one can influence the way in which one is contactable or otherwise, (3) locatability, or how one can influence the accuracy in which oneself or another person can be geographically placed, and (4) multimediality, or how one can produce and/or integrate visual platforms in one’s communication.

In using the ever-portable dating apps particularly, the communicative affordances of mobile media offer Manila’s middle-class millennial Filipino women two important opportunities in their construction of digital flyovers. One is that these apps enable the women to prioritise what we call ‘status proximity’ over ‘spatial proximity’ (see Westcott and Owen 2013). The combined control over availability and locatability that the technologies offer them mean that they can have enhanced capabilities to look for foreign men with a cosmopolitan disposition closer to theirs (status proximity) over the local men of Manila who literally surrounded them (spatial proximity). That said, these very same affordances of availability and locatability still meant that the women were vulnerable to meeting Western men who were not cosmopolitan. After all, the occidentalist assumption that these men are necessarily better than non-Western men is itself problematic (see Bulloch and Fabinyi 2009).

Second, dating apps can be Foucauldian ‘technologies of the self’ that enable the Filipino women to fashion a version of themselves that fits with their cosmopolitan self-narratives and, as such, could challenge problematic tropes about females like them who are interested in dating foreigners (see Hobbs et al. 2017). Because of the multimediality of the communicative tools available to them—ranging from in-

app images and captions as well as beyond-app links that led to other social media accounts—the women could potentially initiate subversive ‘new’ narratives of cross-cultural relationships (see Ellison et al. 2006; Marwick 2013). However, this multimodality also exposes the women to the risk that their strategic refashioning of themselves as attractive cosmopolitan partners might nevertheless be interpreted by Western men from within their problematic imaginaries of what is supposed to be a sexy and desirable Asian woman (see Tsunokai et al. 2014).

In the latter half of this chapter, we attend to the ways in which the abovementioned tensions in the affordances of dating apps and mobile media play out in how the women in this study construct their digital flyovers for dating. We highlight especially how this digital infrastructure of intimacy continues to be entwined in the classed, raced, and gendered frictions of global intimacies in a postcolonial capital like Manila.

### 7.3 Methodology

In our study, we took an ethnographic approach to understanding the mobile media practices of Manila’s middle-class millennial Filipino women. This meant situating their enactment of dating app- and mobile media-enabled digital flyovers within the broader context of their everyday lives (Gillespie 2005). In the course of our 18-month research, which spanned from August 2017 to April 2019, we conducted life story interviews as well as follow up conversations with a total of 15 participants. At the time that we first met them, they were all in their late twenties (27–29 years old) or early thirties (30–33 years old). We had selected these age ranges because these women were already in their twenties when mobile dating apps like Tinder first became popular in the 2010s and as such, knew what dating was like before and after that moment (see Fetters 2018).

In attempting to set the contours of the participants’ middle-classness, meanwhile, we considered two things. One was to see it from the lens of socio-economic status, that is, ‘a social category pertaining to individuals or groups sharing comparable behaviours, characteristics, and way of life’ (Fresnoza-Flot and Shinozaki 2017, p. 891). The other was to see class from the lens of self-ascription, that is, how they themselves performed ‘social divisions [through their] individual practices, subjectivities, and perceptions’ (Fresnoza-Flot and Shinozaki 2017, p. 891). Concretely, the indicators of middle-classness that we looked out for as we did our purposive snowball sampling included the Filipino women’s: (1) educational background, with all of them coming from Manila’s top tier universities, (2) occupation, with all of them being salaried professionals, ranging from being a theatre actor to an advertising suit to a scientist to a medical doctor, (3) network of friends, with all of them being intensely integrated into ‘middle-class Manila’ society, and (4) cosmopolitan sensibilities, with all of them being very well traveled and some of them even having spent a year or more studying or working outside the Philippines (see Hau 2017; Kimura 2003; Pinches 1999).

Apart from the interviews, seven of the Filipino women allowed us—and in some cases, invited us—to do a ‘technical walk-through’ (Light et al. 2018) of the dating apps they had been using. This entailed them opening the apps and guiding us through their key affordances and mechanics as well as their user interface arrangements, functions, and features. The walk-throughs were especially helpful to our research, as they allowed us to gain valuable empirical insight into the mediated spaces created by mobile dating. We were able to see how the participants crafted their dating profiles, swiped through the potential matches offered by the apps, and handled some of the conversations with the Western men that matched with them. Because of the sensitive nature of these walk-throughs—but also of the interview material as well—we have anonymised some of the information about the women in this study. We have changed their names as well as some of the biographic details that might be used to identify them. We ensured, however, that these anonymisation techniques notwithstanding, our account of their stories hew as close as possible to what they had shared with us.

#### 7.4 Cosmopolitan Connections

In the literature review, we briefly indicated that the women in our study sought to enact digital flyovers because of their desire for global intimacies, particularly those that navigated through and broke away from Manila’s confines (De Leon 2017). Common to all of them was that their desire for modern romance seemed to stem from an initial encounter with Western men. Crucially, these initial encounters had a different texture from the exploitative Western man-Asian woman dynamic; a combination of the women’s middle-class status, high level of education, and cosmopolitan experiences meant that they saw these men as, at the very least, their equal (see Hau 2017). Six of them first met Western men as they studied or worked or even just had an extended holiday in cities like Sydney, London, and New York. Others had the chance to meet such men in Manila itself, either because their existing middle-class social networks in the city already included foreigners or because they had an opportune match with a foreigner in one of their dating apps. Through these experiences, the women developed a comparatively negative perception not only of middle-class Filipino men, but also of middle-class Manila dating culture.

Here we return to Erika (27, digital marketing executive) from this chapter’s introductory story. She described what she thought was the usual structure of single dating in middle-class Manila, saying,

Dating here [in middle-class Manila] can be boring after a while. There’s almost a pattern to what happens. The first three dates, which usually happen over three months, would be the ‘getting to know you’ stage. The guys will be all respectful [\*with ‘air quotes’\*] and the girls will be all hard-to-get. Only after that do you get to be a bit more physically intimate. Then, you begin thinking of the possibility of marriage. Because people often wonder about the point of dating if the goal isn’t ending up together.

Eliza (29, theatre actress) pointed out that entwined with middle-class Manila's expectations about dating was its expectations about women's sexuality. Having been in a few relationships that were not necessarily conventional—including having a year-long sexual relationship with a 42-year old married man when she was 22 and fresh out of university—she thought that Filipino men's ideas of how women should be were often very conventional. According to her,

They find it difficult to handle very sexual women like me. And I'm very 'in your face' when it comes to that. Sorry to say this about *Pinoy* (or Filipino) guys [\*addressing Jason\*], but they really can't deal with my sexual appetite. I can be very insatiable...For example, foreigners don't mind that I sleep around. Pinoys would find that deflating. They'll ask me why they're not enough for me. I find that very stifling.

By using dating apps and other mobile media to enact digital flyovers, the women in our study found a way to lift themselves above all these and experience a sustained feeling of being readily connected to a more global and, they hoped, cosmopolitan dating scene. As we said earlier however, such digital infrastructures of intimacy tend to be tenuous (see Cabañes 2019). So, whilst the women felt that mobile dating allowed this sense of constant connection, they were also cognisant that it was often an illusory feeling.

Illustrative here is the case of Steph (28, advertising professional). She demonstrated how it is that in mobile dating, one can control both one's online availability and locatability (Schrock 2015). She did so to prioritise men using status proximity, that is, those Westerners with similar cosmopolitan sensibilities as her, over spatial proximity, that is, the obviously overwhelming number of Filipino men in the city (Westcott and Owen 2013). She said that she found dating apps useful because they made it easy for her to meet the kind of Western men she was looking for. These were the ones who were different from the typical middle-class Filipino men, as they were 'less judgmental' and 'more liberated'. Steph also said that the role of other mobile media—like Whatsapp and Facebook Messenger—was that they served as spaces wherein she could further explore the 'dateability' of the men with whom she matched. This was especially important because it was common practice in dating apps that if one wanted to increase the possibility of meeting a match, one had to quickly move the conversation away from the exceptional spaces of dating apps towards the more mundane spaces of everyday social communication platforms (see Ansari 2015). Through this combination of dating apps and other mobile media, Steph said that she got dozens of matches with Western men and went on to go on dates with 5 of them in a span of 6 months.

Being constantly connected to a more global dating scene, however, did not necessarily guarantee Steph a pleasant experience. If anything, it shattered her assumption that Western men were by default better than non-Western men; they could, for instance, just as easily be sexist (see Bulloch and Fabriyani 2009). Steph said that she had many harrowing experiences with her matches. The most memorable of these was a first and only Skype video chat with a Tinder match who

decided to appear on her screen as just his penis. 'I was with my mom. Walking at a shopping mall,' she recalled. 'She was about to peer at my screen, so I had to contain my panic and shut down the chat as fast as I could'. And even with those whom Steph got to date, none progressed beyond a second meetup. All in all, however, she still pinned her romantic hopes more on non-Filipino men. Assessing her mobile dating experiences so far, she rued with ambivalence:

Despite all these options, you can't find someone who can just see through you...apps like these give us the illusion of choice...but the reality is that the people you meet aren't your real choices. They just come and go in your life, you never had them as an option anyway. The real choice that you have is the person who sticks. They are few and far between, but they are there.

The other key affordance of the digital flyovers, however tenuous, was that it enabled the women in our study to materialise their cosmopolitan selves in their dating lives. They could create dating app profiles that expressed their more 'liberal' sexual desires, which were addressed primarily to Western men. They could also use other mobile media for online flirting and cybersex with these men, sometimes just for the fun of it but also sometimes as a precursor to an actual face-to-face encounter. That said, the women would also often find that Western men would often continue to map onto their online performances their problematic geographic imaginaries of 'exotic Asia'.

During our conversation with Fatima (31, strategic planner), she voluntarily brought out her smartphone and gave us an informal 'walk-through' of the dating app Bumble as well as of her social media profile on the photo sharing app Instagram (Light et al. 2018). Exemplifying the multimediality afforded by mobile dating, she showed us how she made these apps work together to make herself attractive to the kind of Western men that she wanted (see Schrock 2015; see also Hobbs et al. 2017). Fatima said that one of the things she liked about Bumble was its 'feminist' branding, as the app allowed only women to initiate conversations with their matches. She also liked the early 2019 version of the app because apart from enabling her to display her photos and her brief bio, it also gave her a menu of lifestyle preferences that she could choose to display. 'I can be very specific.' Fatima said. 'Like here [\*points to one part of her profile\*], I say that I want to get married eventually. That filters out so many people already! [laughs]'. To those Bumble matches whom Fatima liked enough, she also gave her private Instagram account in exchange for theirs. Apart from being able to check out her matches, she also wanted them to have a better sense of who she was or, to be precise, how she represented herself. In the posts that Fatima shared with us, she said that she simultaneously wanted to show that she was 'hot', hence the sexy images that emphasised her curves and her glowing tan. She also wanted to show, however, that she was more than that, hence the images that showed her cosmopolitan life of good food, cultural pursuits, and world travels.

All the women in our study pointed out that despite their careful online self-representation, some Western men still stereotyped them as an Asian 'whore' or

a 'gold digger' (see Tsunokai et al. 2014). For example, Deirdre (30, marketing professional) expressed her frustration that some Western men chatted with her in overtly exoticised and racialised ways. Showing us her mobile phone album filled with screen grabs of her verbal tussles with her foreigner matches on Tinder, she zeroed in on a lovely conversation with an American man who matched with her on Tinder. That was until the guy said that he actually had a girlfriend and that he was on the app just for a videosex playmate. When Deirdre said that she did not find cheating cool and that she felt sorry for the man's partner, he started verbally assaulting her, ending his volley of insults with 'I'm white. You're brown. You're below me. You're 3rd world slut' (*sic*). Fighting back, Deirdre said, 'Haha funny. Not all Filipinos are like that. Don't think of yourself too highly.' Perhaps flying over the man's simplistic understanding of Filipinos, she also emphasised that she was Filipino-Chinese and, as such, sought to claim the associations of this cultural minority with being the Philippines' economic elite (Hau 2017). As she put it, 'Stupid, I'm yellow. Haha bye.'

### 7.5 Postcolonial Foundations

The fragility of the digital flyovers enacted by Manila's middle-class Filipino women notwithstanding, they did have the privilege of accessing spaces conducive to cosmopolitan global intimacies. This is something that has remained elusive for most others in the Philippines. At the end of our research, 2 of the women we interviewed were in a relatively stable relationship with a foreigner: Erika (27, digital marketing executive) who was engaged to her American boyfriend and Cathy (29, medical doctor) who was living together with her Belgian boyfriend. The others ranged from simply enjoying the global singles dating scene, to being just out of a relationship with a foreigner, or to being at the beginning stages of exploring a new relationship with one.

Still, this digital infrastructure remained a temporary resolution that could only momentarily mitigate the many challenges of doing global intimacies (Cabañes 2019). This was because beneath these digital flyovers of dating apps and other mobile media, the foundations of the Filipino women's 'confines' remained intact (De Leon 2017). They were still very much embedded in a predominantly conservative Roman Catholic and class-divided postcolonial city. This manifested itself in two key ways in the lives of the women in our study.

For one, 12 of the women had the experience of having to be discreet about their relationships with the foreigners whom they had initially met online. This was because their very own families and friends, not to mention broader Filipino society, were still generally judgmental about both dating foreigners and dating apps (see Saroca 2012). Before what she called her 'brief hiatus from the heartbreak of online dating', Tina (fashion designer, 33) was actively chatting with different foreign men, and not just Westerners, primarily through the dating app Badoo. Its special feature was its 'search function', which allowed users to see who was on the app in an entirely different city or part of the world. This was important

for her as she deliberately chose only to be visible to people outside of Manila, for fear that her friends would see her dating profile. Tina explained that she did not want anyone to tell on her, especially since she had an extremely conservative family, what with her father who was a high-ranking military officer and her mother who was a devout Roman Catholic housewife. She recalled how she had almost allowed one of the Indian men she had matched with to come visit her in Manila, but that she pulled back at the last minute for fear of what the people closest to her would say.

Even for those who had experienced being in relatively long-term relationships, discretion was still quite common. Cathy (29, medical doctor) assumed that she was more fortunate compared to others in a similar situation as hers because her parents were atypically open-minded about relationships with foreigners. She said that she grew up in a household where both her mother and father often invited foreigner friends, so they did not really bat an eyelash when she introduced her Belgian partner, who was then in a long-distance relationship with her. But when the Belgian man moved in with Cathy in Manila, they had to keep their living arrangement on the downlow. 'I'm not ashamed of it, of course not,' she said. 'But I also just want to live a quiet life.' Tellingly, only Eliza (29, theatre actress), with her self-professed 'fierce' persona could go head-on with what other people thought. 'If you date a white man, then people think you're a hooker. But I decided to get over that.' She even regularly posted about her Tinder experiences on an open Facebook account solely dedicated to shaming the Western men that dared to racialise and exoticise her. In one of these public posts, she featured one of her American matches who asked her over text why she could speak English so well. She responded, 'Hahahaha omg [or oh my god]. It's a little thing called colonisation and globalisation.'

The second way in which the unchanged 'foundations' of the women's digital flyovers manifested itself was in their stance towards relationships. Although dating apps and other mobile media made it easier for them to explore more diverse experiences of sexuality, all of them still longed to eventually find 'The One'. That is, that special person with whom they could have a long-term, monogamous relationship. This is very much in line with what scholars of mobile dating in the West have found (for example, Hobbs et al. 2017). Fatima (31, strategic planner) articulated this idea most clearly. She said that she had enjoyed all the sexual exploits she has had with Western men, ever since she went on a university student exchange programme in Toronto. As she put it, 'When I told one of my male Filipino friends the number of men I slept with, he suggested that I shouldn't be bandying it around. But why shouldn't it be okay for a woman to experience all of that?' When we asked her if it was okay to know how many kinds of foreign men she had slept with, she said, 'It's United Nations level. I can't remember them all, but I can tell you there was an Australian, German, French, a Black American, and many others. \*laughs\*' At the same time, however, Fatima also said that at some point, it got tiring and she was now keen to find a more stable longer-term

relationship. And she made this clear on all her dating app profiles. This dynamic was something that came up again and again with the other women in the study.

For those who eventually found out that their cultural differences with Western men could be difficult to overcome, they did not necessarily give up on finding 'The One'. They instead adjusted their search parameters, in life generally but in their dating apps as well. And in the cases of 5 of the women, they spoke about wanting to date a foreigner who was half-Filipino or who was at the very least familiar with Filipino culture. One of these 5 was Grace (30, scientist). She said that after her string of difficulties dating foreign men, she was now more interested in what she called 'Fil-foreigners' or foreigners with Filipino descent. Grace explained, 'What I like about Fil-foreigners is that they are the best of both worlds. They understand Filipino culture, but they're not completely immersed in it.' To close out the data sections of this chapter, we return to Erika (27, digital marketing executive). As one of the abovementioned 5 women, she said that one of the reasons why she fell in love with her American fiancé was that he was no stranger to Filipino culture. 'He grew up with a Filipino best friend', she recounted. 'So, he didn't have problems relating to the cultural things I was telling him...He knew so many things about Filipino culture.'

## 7.6 Conclusion

This chapter looked into how Manila's middle-class millennial Filipino women use dating apps and other mobile media to explore relationships with foreign men, and Westerners particularly. It argued that through mobile dating technologies, these women enacted a distinct kind of temporary resolution to the challenges of experiencing global intimacies in a postcolonial city (Cabañes 2019; Collantes 2018). In particular, they constructed digital flyovers that allowed them to bypass what they thought to be 'uncosmopolitan' Filipino men and to connect with foreign romantic prospects who shared their own 'globalised' backgrounds and sensibilities. We showed that on one hand, these digital flyovers meant that the women in our study did have the privilege of accessing spaces conducive to cosmopolitan global intimacies, something that remained elusive for most people in the Philippines. But on the other hand, these digital flyovers did nothing to change the 'foundations' beneath them or the 'confines' of Philippine society, which meant that the women's embeddedness in middle-class Manila's distinct social dynamics insisted on manifesting itself in their romantic and sexual lives.

A critical point we want to tease out from this research is about a particular dynamic that undergirds middle-class millennial Filipino women's experiences of mobile mediated global intimacies. That is, they often involve—whether wittingly or otherwise—an act of distancing from other lower-class Filipino women, or any other lower-class women from Asia or the so-called 'third world'. To exclude themselves from the predominance of traditional relationships and conservative ideas about female sexuality in Manila, they rely not only on their privileged access to polymedia. They also bring to bear their social and cultural capital in navigating

these technologies. In challenging the harmful racial prescriptions by foreigners particularly, the women do not always negate the said prescriptions as a whole. They instead tend to assert their distinction from lower class Filipino women. Without always saying it directly, they articulate that they are highly educated, cosmopolitan, and just like the ideal of a Westerner who is a citizen of the world.

This act of distancing in which the Manila's middle-class Filipino women engage is indicative of the difficulty of the desire for materialising modern love via mobile spaces that are entangled in a postcolonial city such as Manila. This is because these global aspirations are premised on an assertion of middle-classness and cosmopolitanism in the midst of what is often contexts of significant deprivation (Arora and Scheiber 2017). In light of this, an important question that needs further consideration is whether and how the middle-class drive for liberated intimacies might actually overlap with how the lower class also often transgress the conservative sexual moralities of a postcolonial society (see Lorenzana 2019). And if so, could it be that going against some of the very norms central to middle-classness—especially the control of sexuality to signal middle-class respectability—might indicate a broader societal chance that is afoot? As intimacies in the myriad postcolonial metropolises continue to globalise with the assistance of these mobile dating apps and as middle-class women express their own modernity and cosmopolitanism, it is important to be attentive to the possibilities of new forms of intimate relationships and even solidarities that might open up amidst the continuing social strains around race, gender, and class.

**Acknowledgments** We are grateful to Jozon Lorenzana and Cheryl Ruth Soriano for their insightful comments on the draft versions of this piece. We would also like to thank our fellow scholars who shared their thoughts on the presentation versions of this piece at the *School of Media and Communication Research Seminar Series* at the University of Leeds, UK, the *Online Intimacies, Intimacies Online Conference* at Roskilde University, Denmark, and the *Digital Transactions in Asia 2018 Conference* at De La Salle University-Manila, The Philippines.

## References

- Albay, C. (2017). *What these 10 Pinays who found love with foreigners want you to know*. Retrieved from <https://www.cosmo.ph/relationships/pinays-love-lessons-foreigners-relationship-a45-20170828-lfrm2>
- Angeles, L., & Sunanta, S. (2007). Websites, gendered representation, and the transnational migration of Filipino and Thai women. *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies*, 22(1), 3–31.
- Ansari, A. (2015). *Modern romance*. London: Allen Lane.
- Arora, P., & Scheiber, L. (2017). Slumdog romance: Facebook love and digital privacy at the margins. *Media, Culture and Society*, 39(3), 408–422. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717691225>.

- Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2014). *Distant love*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bulloch, H., & Fabinyi, M. (2009). Transnational relationships, transforming selves: Filipinas seeking husbands abroad. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 10(2), 129–142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442210902856857>.
- Cabañes, J. V. A. (2014). Multicultural mediations, developing world realities: Indians, Koreans and Manila's entertainment media. *Media, Culture and Society*, 36(5), 628–643. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443714532979>.
- Cabañes, J. V. A. (2019). Information and communication technologies and migrant intimacies: The case of Punjabi youth in Manila. *Journal of Ethic and Migration Studies*, 45(9), 1650–1666. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1453790>.
- Cabrera, M. B. G. (2007). *The role of cyberspace in marriage migration in Asia: Claiming spaces for intervention*. Retrieved from [http://www.isiswomen.org/downloads/wia/wia-2007-3/03wia07\\_09cim\\_Marion.pdf](http://www.isiswomen.org/downloads/wia/wia-2007-3/03wia07_09cim_Marion.pdf)
- Chant, S. (2005). Gender and tourism employment in Mexico and the Philippines. In M. T. Sinclair (Ed.), *Gender, work and tourism* (pp. 129–188). London: Routledge.
- Chua, P. (2017). *25 social entrepreneurs changing lives in the Philippines*. Retrieved from <https://www.townandcountry.ph/people/philanthropy/25-social-entrepreneurs-changing-the-philippines-a1934-20170803-lfrm3>
- Collantes, C. F. (2018). *Reproductive dilemmas in Metro Manila: Faith, intimacies and globalization*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Connaughton, R., Pimlott, J., & Anderson, D. (1995). *The Battle for Manila: The most devastating untold story of World War II*. Novato: Presidio Press.
- Constable, N. (2003). *Romance on a global stage: Pen pals, virtual ethnography, and 'mail order' marriages*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Constable, N. (Ed.). (2010). *Cross-border marriages: Gender and mobility in transnational Asia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Cornelio, J. S. (2016). *Being Catholic in the contemporary Philippines: Young people reinterpreting religion*. New York: Routledge.
- David, G., & Cambre, C. (2016). Screened intimacies: Tinder and the swipe logic. *Social Media + Society*, 2(2), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116641976>.

- De Leon, C. (2017) *Afams and why I tend to date them*. Retrieved from <https://www.philstar.com/lifestyle/supreme/2017/06/09/1708384/assignment-afams-and-why-i-tend-date-them>
- Duerr, R. I. (2015) Philippines struggling to tackle child prostitution. Retrieved from: <https://www.dw.com/en/philippines-struggling-to-tackle-child-prostitution/a-18305386>.
- Ellison, N., Heino, R., & Gibbs, J. (2006). Managing impressions online: Self-presentation processes in the online dating environment. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2), 415–441. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00020.x>.
- Faier, L. (2009). *Intimate encounters: Filipina women and the remaking of rural Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fetters, A. (2018) *The 5 years that changed dating*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/12/tinder-changed-dating/578698/>
- Fresnoza-Flot, A., & Ricordeau, G. (2013). Migrations, amours et mariages: parcours de femmes philippines mariées à des hommes français. *Migrations Société*, 1(145), 137–152. <https://doi.org/10.3917/migra.145.0137>.
- Fresnoza-Flot, A., & Shinozaki, K. (2017). Transnational perspectives on intersecting experiences: Gender, social class and generation among Southeast Asian migrants and their families. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43(6), 867–884. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2016.1274001>.
- Gamboa, V. (2019). *Here's an app that will allow girls to make the first move*. Retrieved from <https://lifestyle.mb.com.ph/2019/04/05/heres-an-app-that-will-allow-girls-to-make-the-first-move/>
- Giddens, A. (1992). *The transformation of intimacy: Sexuality, love and eroticism in modern societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gillespie, M. (Ed.). (2005). *Media audiences*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Gonzales, T. (2017) *Why is Tinder in Manila so tragic?* Retrieved from <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/lifestyle/content/620248/why-is-tinder-in-manila-so-tragic/story/>
- Hau, C. (2017). *Elites and ilustrados in Philippine culture*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.

Hawkins, C. (2015). *We need to talk about the big problem with online dating for Asian women*. Retrieved from <https://mic.com/articles/107840/we-need-to-talk-about-the-big-problem-with-online-dating-for-asian-women#.xJouOcaa6>

Hiew, D. N., Halford, W. K., Van de Vijver, F. J., & Liu, S. (2015). Relationship standards and satisfaction in Chinese, Western, and intercultural Chinese–Western couples in Australia. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 46*(5), 684–701. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022115579936>.

Hobbs, M., Owen, S., & Gerber, L. (2017). Liquid love? Dating apps, sex, relationships and the digital transformation of intimacy. *Journal of Sociology, 53*(2), 271–284.

Illouz, E. (2012). *Why love hurts*. Cambridge: Polity.

Irving, D. R. M. (2010). *Colonial counterpoint: Music in early modern Manila*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jeffreys, S. (1999). Globalizing sexual exploitation: Sex tourism and the traffic in women. *Leisure Studies, 18*(3), 179–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/026143699374916>.

Jones, G., & Shen, H. H. (2008). International marriage in East and Southeast Asia: Trends and research emphases. *Citizenship Studies, 12*(1), 9–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621020701794091>.

Kimura, M. (2003). The emergence of the middle classes and political change in the Philippines. *The Developing Economies, 41*(2), 264–284. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1049.2003.tb00941.x>.

Light, B., Burgess, J., & Duguay, S. (2018). The walkthrough method: An approach to the study of apps. *New Media & Society, 20*(3), 881–900. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816675438>.

Lim, R. (2015). *Here's why Manila is the best place to be an expat*. Retrieved from <https://www.kalibrr.com/advice/2015/02/manila-expats>

Loos, T. (2008). A history of sex and the state in Southeast Asia: Class, intimacy and invisibility. *Citizenship Studies, 12*(1), 27–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621020701794133>.

Lorenzana, J. (2019). Resilient love: Intimacy, surveillance and (dis)trust in Metro Manila. In A. Athique & E. Baulch (Eds.), *Digital transactions in Asia: Economic informational and social exchanges*. New York: Routledge.

- Madianou, M., & Miller, D. (2012). *Migration and new media: Transnational families and poly-media*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Marwick, A. E. (2013). *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Miller, D., & Sinanan, J. (2014). *Webcam*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Pananakhonsab, W. (2016). *Love and intimacy in online cross-cultural relationships*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Parker, L., & Dales, L. (2014). Introduction: The everyday agency of women in Asia. *Asian Studies Review*, 38(2), 164–167.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2014.899313>.
- Parreñas, R. (2011). *Illicit flirtations: Labor, migration, and sex trafficking in Tokyo*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Peracullo, J. C. (2014). Resistance/collusion with masculinist-capitalist fantasies? Japanese and Filipino women in the cyber-terrain. In A. M. Brazal & K. Abraham (Eds.), *Feminist cyberethics in Asia: Religious discourses on human connectivity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pinches, M. (1999). *Culture and privilege in capitalist Asia*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Puhm, C. (2017). *These are the key factors that keep tourists from visiting the Philippines*. Retrieved from <https://www.esquiremag.ph/politics/this-report-shows-why-more-tourists-aren-t-visiting-the-philippines-a00201-20170609>
- Rappler Social Media Team. (2015). *Which dating apps are worth it? Tinder, OKCupid, HowAboutWe?* Retrieved from <https://www.rappler.com/technology/social-media/86548-dating-apps-trial>
- Roces, M. (2000). Negotiating modernities: Filipino women 1970–2000. In L. Edwards & M. Roces (Eds.), *Women in Asia: Tradition, modernity and globalisation* (pp. 112–138). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Saroca, N. (1997). Filipino women, sexual politics, and the gendered racist discourse of the mail order bride. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies: JIGS*, 2(2), 89.
- Saroca, C. (2012). Filipino—Australian intimacies online: love, romance and ‘naughty emoti- cons’. *South East Asia Research*, 20(1), 53–82.  
<https://doi.org/10.5367/sear.2012.0087>.

Schrock, A. R. (2015). Communicative affordances of mobile media: Portability, availability, locatability, and multimediality. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1229–1246.

So, C. (2006). Asian mail-order brides, the threat of global capitalism, and the rescue of the US nation-state. *Feminist Studies*, 32(2), 395–419. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20459093>.

Tacon, D. (2015). *Philippines generation of sex tourism children*. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2015/03/philippines-generation-sex-tourism-children-150305120628971.html>

Tadiar, N. X. (2004). *Fantasy production: Sexual economies and other Philippine consequences for the new world order*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Tolentino, R. B. (2001). *National/transnational: Subject formation and media in and on the Philippines*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.

Tsunokai, G. T., McGrath, A. R., & Kavanagh, J. K. (2014). Online dating preferences of Asian Americans. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 31(6), 796–814. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407513505925>.

Tubeza, P. (2011). *40% of foreign male tourists come to Philippines for sex*. Retrieved from <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/13227/40-of-foreign-male-tourists-come-to-philippines-for-sex>

Uy-Tioco, C. S. (2019). 'Good enough' access: Digital inclusion, social stratification, and the reinforcement of class in the Philippines. *Communication Research and Practice*, 5(2), 156–171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2019.1601492>.

We Are Social. (2018). *Digital report 2018*. Retrieved from <https://digitalreport.wearesocial.com/>

Westcott, H., & Owen, S. (2013). Friendship and trust in the social surveillance network. *Surveillance and Society*, 11(3), 311–323. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v11i3.4502>.

Wilson, A. R. (2004). *Ambition and identity: Chinese merchant elites in colonial Manila, 1880–1916*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.