



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2023:
The 24th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers**
Philadelphia, PA, USA / 18-21 Oct 2023

WOULD YOU DATE A MAID?

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Subaltern Migrant Workers in Singapore during the Covid-19 Pandemic

In most destinations, migrants with a domestic worker visa are bound laborers. Their legal residency depends on their continuous and sole employment by their sponsor as it constrains their ability to change sponsors. This is the case in Canada, Great Britain, Israel, Taiwan, Singapore, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Anderson 2000; Bakan and Stasiulis 2005; Lan 2007; Liebelt 2011; Mahdavi 2011). This paper looks at Singapore as a research site because it is a major destination for migrant domestic workers. This paper asks, how do employers manage their power over domestic workers who are bound to them in servitude, and what is the role of TikTok access, and any internet access in general?

Each year, thousands of domestic workers from India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines seek legal employment in Singapore. Legal conditions of domestic work in Singapore similarly reflect those of other destinations. In Singapore, the temporary legal status of migrant domestic workers binds them in servitude to their employer-sponsor as their residency is contingent on their continuous and sole live-in employment with a sponsor whose permission they must secure to transfer jobs. This legal status technically renders domestic workers unfree and precarious as it gives employers tremendous power over domestic workers (Parreñas et al. 2021).

This paper combines two studies: a digital ethnography of FDWs on TikTok, and semi-structured interviews with thirty employers in Singapore conducted by the author in 2014. This paper then builds on the 2022 analysis of TikTok profiles of domestic workers that had a comparatively large following and content exceeding 1,000 views. Profiles were studied to identify foreign domestic workers employed in Singapore who were creating content on TikTok. Videos were coded and content analyzed around emergent themes of sexism and intercultural communication. This paper considers these findings in the context of repressive employment conditions.

Suggested Citation (APA): Kantachote, K. (2023, October). *Would you date a maid?* Paper presented at AoIR2023: The 24th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Philadelphia, PA, USA: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

The author identifies 'soft violence' as a tool that employers utilize to manage domestic workers' TikTok access. "Soft violence" refers to the practice of concealing the unequal relationship in domestic work via the cultivation of a relationship of "personalism" while simultaneously amplifying one's control of domestic workers (Parreñas et al. 2021). Employers claim to recognize domestic workers as "human" in relieving servitude and precarity. However, at the same time, they act on their relationship of unequal dependency, thus concurrently amplifying servitude. They relieve servitude in various ways: allocate breaks during the day, maintain an 'open kitchen' policy, grant a day off, and give domestic workers access to a mobile phone, including the Internet. However, most simultaneously amplify servitude. Employers do this when they impose a 'partially open kitchen' policy, maintain a curfew or impose temporal limits on internet and mobile phone access. More significantly, most employers magnify the unfree status of domestic workers when they withhold their domestic workers' salaries or subject them to a relationship of debt bondage (Parreñas et al. 2021). "Soft violence" thus emerges from the paradoxical relationship of simultaneously relieving and amplifying servitude through financial and digital restrictions. Thus, this paper asks, how does "soft violence" manifest in FDW content on TikTok?

References

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