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## **INTERSECTIONS OF OFFLINE AND VIRTUAL CONTACT ZONES: TRANSNATIONAL MIGRANTS' TRANSCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS IN SINGAPORE**

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The emergence of a multiplicity of new technologies in the new media age has substantially changed migration experiences, communication and information channels, and means and types of social participation and interaction of migrants (cf. Hopkins 2009, Alonso 2010, Alonso and Oiarzabal 2010, Ros 2010, Oiarzabal and Reips 2012). Research on the role of new media for migrants has so far focused particularly on the change of the nature and organisation of transnational social networks to other transnational subjects through the new media. Much less often has research focused on how new media are influencing the ways and types of engagements and interactions between the migrant and host population, on the effects of their virtual encounters, and the dialectic connections between virtual and offline relations. As Massey (2012: 91) has pointed out, the "question which is raised by speed-up, by 'the communications revolution' and by cyberspace, is not whether space will be annihilated but what kinds of multiplicities (patterning of uniqueness) and relations will be co-constructed with these new kinds of spatial configurations". As a result, in this paper I am inquiring: How do encounters in virtual space interlink with or even shape offline transcultural encounters and vice versa? How are both types of encounters shaping transcultural knowledge and experiences and notions of "the other". In how far do both types of encounters reduce or produce transcultural prejudices and stereotypes? If and how has the relation between online and offline encounters and their effects changed related to the length of stay of migrants in their migration destination?

The argument is based on 46 in-depth interviews with highly-skilled transnational migrants based in Singapore, who work in the city-state, have received tertiary education, and stay on employment passes (EPs) or permanent residency passes (PRs). The study embraces migrants that have stayed for different time periods in Singapore – from some who have just arrived to some who have stayed in Singapore for several decades. Given Singapore's large migrant stock that amounts to almost forty per cent, everyday life in the city is characterised by diverse offline contact zones between its citizen and the migrant population (cf. Ye 2013) that are increasingly complemented by virtual encounters. Based on Pratt's (1991, 20082) concept of the "contact zone" Bork-Hüffer (forthcoming) has defined transcultural encounters taking

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place online as "virtual contact zones", which are "spaces where members of the host society and the migrant community directly "meet" on the internet, interact, and exchange or indirectly read, see or otherwise receive information on the other party, while both (possibly also mixed) forms of engagement with online spaces involve the emergence and construction of individual or collective transcultural experiences and knowledge." There are diverse and multiple types of virtual contact zones in the times of "polymedia" (Madianou and Miller 2013). In this paper different web 2.0 applications are analysed in regard to their role as virtual contact zones.

Preliminary results indicate that migrants often participate in a variety of virtual contact zones, where they have different contact points to the host society, while the types of and frequency of use of virtual spaces for encounters changes throughout the migration process. Virtual contact zones play a much larger role in moulding transcultural knowledge and notions of the culture of the host society before and directly after arrival in the migration destination. In contrast, for migrants who have stayed for a longer time in the city, offline encounters are the decisive factor in the process of the construction of their transcultural notions, and online virtual contact zones rather serve the maintenance of offline encounters.

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