Sis, mamsh, kasodan[1]: Belonging and solidarity on Facebook groups among Filipino women migrants in Japan

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Abstract

This article explores how Filipino women migrants in Japan have appropriated Facebook to create alternative spaces and connections for addressing their needs and concerns. Using thematic analysis of discussion threads and in-depth interviews with members of the Facebook group, *Pinoy Tambayan* in Japan, this study shows the nuanced aspects of the gendered dimension of online ethnic enclaves on Facebook. Facebook has allowed these migrants to create online ethnic enclaves that function as an alternative to kinship and community groups—groups that Filipinos consider an invaluable resource for managing families and strengthening ties to their identity. This social, intimate tie is epitomized in terms of endearment used by members: *sis* (sister), *mamsh* (fellow godmother), and *kasodan* (fellow seekers of information). These terms invoke relational ties, not by blood but by shared commonalities, between the author and group members. However, while online ethnic enclaves have become an increasingly vital source of support among Filipino women migrants, the limits of these online communicative spaces can be observed, particularly in terms of visibility. In mainstream media and the wider host society, the intimate gendered narratives of Filipino women migrants are rarely discussed, and consequently, these women are misrecognized and stigmatized.

Keywords: Ethnic Enclave, Migrant Communities, Filipino Migrants, Communication Technologies, Feminine Solidarity, Facebook

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Introduction

In 2016, a friend invited me to join a private Facebook group she and 13 other Filipino women migrants had created back in 2013. I was already aware of how Filipino migrants in Japan were using Facebook Groups to sell goods among themselves but had not considered joining such a group because I was not familiar with any of its members, nor did I see the need to do so[2]. This particular group, *Pinoy Tambayan in Japan* (PTJ)[3], was primarily established to create an online platform where members could sell products and share information. I joined the group out of curiosity and discovered a community of over 24,000 Filipino migrants (as of January 2022). The vibrancy of this virtual space reminds me of a Filipino *sari-sari* store (a neighborhood sundry store), where people buy goods and *tambay* (hang out) with other people from their local neighborhood. In some communities in the Philippines, this has become a daily practice where locals would go in the afternoon to buy or eat *merienda* (snacks) and exchange stories or the *tsismis* (gossip) of the day. *Pinoy Tambayan in Japan* is an online ethnic enclave akin to a local *tambayan* (hang-out place), where informal and intimate connections are developed, and previously inaccessible opportunities are made accessible.

The emergence of online ethnic enclaves, such as PTJ, is significant because there are no large-scale Filipino ethnic enclaves in Japan to date (Takahata, 2021). Filipinos in Japan are geographically dispersed, and due to this, their communities are predominantly understood as "collapsible" (Ibarra, 1996, as cited in Takahata, 2021, p. 106) and with low social capital (Suzuki, 2015). These communities are "temporary concentrations" (p. 106) that occur after Sunday Mass at local Catholic Churches, where Filipinos meet to exchange information and make friends over snacks and beverages. In contrast, this study shows a ubiquitous online concentration of Filipino migrants in Facebook Groups that resembles offline migrant ethnic enclaves.

To understand how the use of communicative technologies shapes the experiences of Filipino women migrants in Japan, I conducted a qualitative, ethnographic study from 2016 to 2021 through online and offline participant observation. I also examined multi-modal posts and comments on different topics discussed in the group and conducted in-depth interviews with eight group members. After analyzing the primary data set, I surmised that the most active participants in the group are women, who mainly discuss how to manage their mixed-roots families, motherhood, migrant aspirations, and other gendered experiences. This concurs with the predominantly female demographic of Filipino residents in Japan.

Thus, I decided to mainly draw from two feminist fields of inquiry, one in migration and another in mediated communication, to make sense of the salient gendered utilization of online ethnic enclaves in Japan. Regarding the former, I followed Rhacel Parreñas' (2009) suggestion of understanding the gendered inequalities that surround and shape migration experiences to analyze the gendered dimension of online ethnic enclaves. I traced the historical state-sponsored migration trend that stimulated movements of Filipino women to Japan while highlighting the contexts that hindered social integration and ethnic community formations. For the latter, I used the concept of "intimate publics" (Berlant, 2008) in digital spaces (Dobson et al., 2018) to analyze the nature of affective belonging and solidarity fostered on Facebook Groups and how intimacy is constructed and sustained among strangers in these groups.

I found that the circulation of intimate gendered narratives through the posts and comments on the discussion board shapes and sustains the involvement of Filipino women migrants in PTJ. In this sense, the discussion board acts as an important communicative and interactive space, much like a local tambayan does in the Philippines. For many members, the circulation of individual narratives provides pedagogic opportunities, where learning about other members' experiences helps them make sense of themselves and those around them (Cabalquinto & Soriano, 2020). These gendered narratives offer an affective magnetism with unknown others because their experiences of gendered inequalities throughout their migration and settlement process have been recognized and validated.

Through this study, we can observe that the affordances of social media have allowed Filipino women migrants to reconfigure social ties (Cabañes & Uy-Tioco, 2020) in their new locality, prompting a reterritorialization process in which migrants are enabled to "restructure their local places of abode under new conditions" (Machimura, 2006, pp. 56-57, as cited in Takahata, 2018, p. 258). Facebook Groups have allowed them to create an online ethnic enclave that functions as an alternative to kinship and community groups—groups that Filipinos consider an invaluable resource for managing families and strengthening ties to their identity. This social, intimate tie is epitomized in terms of endearment used by members of PTJ: *sis (*sister), *mamsh* (fellow godmother), and *kasodan* (fellow seekers of information). These terms invoke relational ties, not by blood but by shared commonalities, between the author and their audience. However, while online ethnic enclaves have become an increasingly vital source of support among Filipino women migrants, the limits of these online communicative spaces can be observed in the case of PTJ, particularly in terms of visibility. The intimate gendered plights of Filipino women migrants remain rarely discussed outside their communities and, consequently, these women are misrecognized by the wider host society.

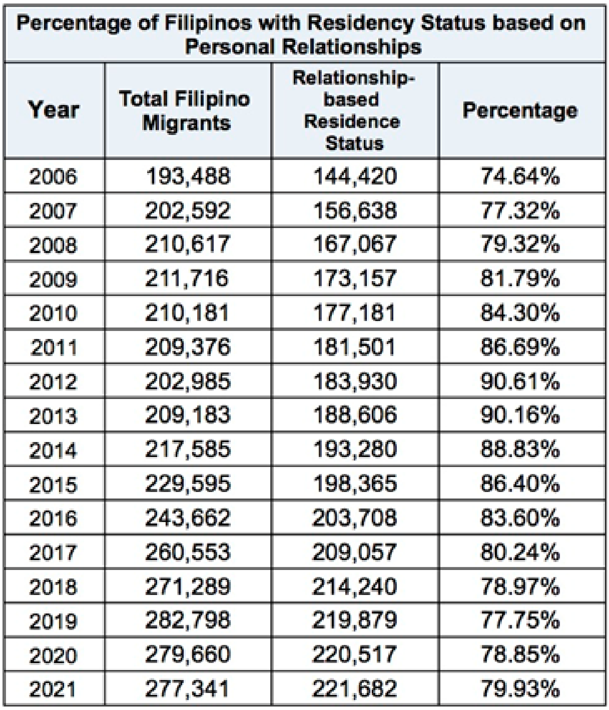
Filipino women migrants and their families

Drawing from Parreñas' (2009) suggestion of inserting feminism into migration studies, I provide a brief history of the migration trend that led to the feminization of the Filipino migrant demographic and the formation of Japanese-Filipino families in Japan. In addition, I discuss the lack of support mechanisms that hinder migrant community formation and social integration (Takahata, 2018) and the assimilationist stance on integration adopted by the Japanese government. This structural marginalization has subjected Filipino women to feelings of isolation and the subsequent lack of awareness of the plurality of their subjected experiences. I posit that the social and structural inequalities confronting Filipino women migrants have contributed to the way they have appropriated digital spaces. Online ethnic enclaves have afforded them with communicative and interactive tools to re-embed themselves in their new locality by creating links with their co-ethnics. This has helped them not only transform resources into different forms of capital but also cope with social and structural marginalization, such as the marginalization arising from the gendered power relations in their household and community.

According to the Ministry of Justice (2021), there were roughly 277,000 Filipinos living in Japan as of June 2021, of which about 70% were women. The predominantly female demographic can be traced to the state-sponsored migration trend during the late-1970s, which led to the employment of many Filipino women in Japan's entertainment districts. During this time, numerous Filipino women came to the country with entertainer visas, working in clubs, pubs, and snack bars (Seiger, 2014), and others migrated to rural villages to become *hanayome* (bride) to Japanese men (Celero, 2018). These migration trends ultimately bolstered the conventional pathway to settlement in Japan—inter-ethnic marriages between Japanese and Filipinos (Suzuki, 2003; Suzuki, 2007; Takahata, 2018; Zulueta, 2018). From 2006 to 2021, approximately 80% of the Filipino migrant population obtained their residency status through their relationship with their kin or by marrying a Japanese spouse (as shown in Table 1).

The intersectional marginalization of Filipino women migrants has been widely studied in different contexts within Japan's economic and socio-cultural structures (see Celero, 2014; Ito, 2005; Parreñas, 2011; Suzuki, 2003). The vulnerability of Filipino women is attributed to their lack of social, economic, and human capital in conjunction with an asymmetrical, xenophobic, and sexist acceptance of women in Japanese society (Ito, 2005; Suzuki, 2015). Many have low educational attainment and lack specialized knowledge or professional skills. Some experience deskilling due to long-term employment in the service or entertainment industries or by becoming

Table 1 . Percentage of Filipinos whose residency status is based on personal relationships



Percentage of Filipinos with Residency Status based on Personal Relationships

Year	Total Filipino Migrants	Relationship-based Residence Status	Percentage
2006	193,488	144,420	74.64%
2007	202,592	156,638	77.32%
2008	210,617	167,067	79.32%
2009	211,716	173,157	81.79%
2010	210,181	177,181	84.30%
2011	209,376	181,501	86.69%
2012	202,985	183,930	90.61%
2013	209,183	188,606	90.16%
2014	217,585	193,280	88.83%
2015	229,595	198,365	86.40%
2016	243,662	203,708	83.60%
2017	260,553	209,057	80.24%
2018	271,289	214,240	78.97%
2019	282,798	219,879	77.75%
2020	279,660	220,517	78.85%
2021	277,341	221,682	79.93%

Source: Compiled by author from data on Statistics on Foreign Residents in Japan by the Immigration Services Agency of Japan. This includes the following categories: Permanent Resident, Long-term Resident, Spouse/child of Japanese, and Special Permanent Resident.

full-time housewives (Suzuki, 2015). Further exacerbating these circumstances is the high divorce rate among Japanese-Filipino couples, which has led many single Filipino mothers to poverty and eventual dependence on the social welfare system (Celero, 2014; Takahata, 2018). Naoto Higuchi (as cited in Celero, 2014) noted that in 2011, Filipino women migrants were the fourth largest receiver of public assistance in Japan, having a 45% relief rate. The stigmatization of social welfare recipients has further hindered the social integration process of Filipino migrants into Japanese society (Celero, 2014).

As previously mentioned, scholars have highlighted the absence of neighborhood-like migrant enclaves in Japan despite its large Filipino resident population (Suzuki, 2015; Takahata, 2018, 2021). They contend that Filipino ethnic community formations are elusive because the populace is geographically dispersed. According to Sachi Takahata (2021), Filipino migrants had no control in deciding their place of residence due to their residence qualifications. For instance, migrants who came to Japan as entertainers were "compelled to follow the strict guidance of their promoters" (Takahata, 2021, p. 4). Afterward, when migrants married their Japanese partners to extend their stay once their six-month work contracts had expired, they had to settle in areas where their spouses resided (Suzuki, 2015; Takahata, 2021). To further complicate matters, the Japanese government has placed minimal effort in installing adequate integration programs because it views migrants as short-term, temporary residents (Celero, 2018) and migrant communities as places at risk of becoming hotbeds of crime (Takahata, 2018). Nobue Suzuki (2015) stated that as a consequence of the government's attitude towards migrants, Filipinos in Japan have lower social capital compared to their contemporaries in other countries of destination (e.g., Hong Kong, Singapore), and their capacity for confronting integration challenges, such as coping with isolation, is considered weak. In the lives of Filipino women migrants, who must also contend with homemaker duties in an unfamiliar environment without being able to rely on a kinship or community support system, this has resulted in an increased "care burden" (Ogaya, 2015, p. 213).

While progress has been moderate, the development in more recent years of social integration policies in Japan has been moving towards extending support to its foreign residents (Takahata, 2018). However, Ito Ruri (2005) explored ways that women migrants participate in strategic economic and social activities, such as engagement in informal market activities, mutual aid networks, and associational networks. Migrant support networks or organizations (MSOs) have taken a significant role in mediating the gap between migrants, governmental institutions, and the host society (Celero, 2018). They have lobbied for more sociopolitical rights by fostering local citizenships (Tsuda, 2006, as cited in Celero, 2018, p. 245) that promote countering mainstream representations of migrants in Japan, opening paths for recognition and legitimization of a post-national membership to the society. MSOs have also provided support for everyday survival and well-being by equipping migrants with social and cultural capital that helps them with the challenges of living in Japan (Celero, 2018).

Despite the substantial victories of MSOs, such as when their lobbying efforts resulted in the passing of the 2008 Nationality Amendment Law, which secured the legal citizenship rights for Japanese-Filipino children born out of wedlock, the acquisition of full citizenship rights continues to be ambivalent (Suzuki, 2010). The emergence of online ethnic enclaves such as PTJ demonstrates the persistent challenges of migration and integration in Japan. Moreover, while the role of non-state actors in pushing for greater rights, recognition, and acceptance remains relevant, online ethnic enclaves show the inadequacies of formal networks in providing assistance, especially to those living in rural areas. The case of PTJ shows another non-state actor in the form of a migrant-led informal online movement. Utilizing the communicative and interactive space on Facebook, they are able to share private matters that are often invisible and sanctioned by their locality. These narratives become publicized and open for discussion and introspection, enabling a restructuring of social intimacies despite existing social and institutional barriers. The presence of online ethnic enclaves is a big part of this development. In the next section, I examine how social media has enabled the reconfiguration of social intimacies among geographically dispersed co-ethnics through Facebook Groups.

Migrants and the formation of affective belonging and solidarity in digital spaces

According to Anthony Giddens (1990), new technologies have the capacity to instigate a re-organization process of social relations across "indefinite spans of time and space" (as cited in Andersson, 2019, p. 156), generating new patterns of socialization and identification. For migrants who are generally described as uprooted because their ties are severed from their community of origin (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Faist, 2000), new media have become an integral tool for re-embedding social mechanisms through mediated communication across diverse time and space (Benítez, 2006). Although most studies focus on how migrants use digital media to cope with the distance and maintain transnational familial and social ties (for instance, Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016), there are only a few that explore the migrant community formations that take place within the host society through digital platforms.

According to Wenjing Liu (2020), the introduction of Web 2.0 digital platforms, including social media, has allowed marginalized communities to "initiate and sustain multiple layers of relationships that transcend local and national boundaries" (p. 52). Liu states that this is because users can generate and share information and, more importantly, interact with other users across different scales of sociality (e.g., one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many). Before social media, the circulation of gendered and intimate narratives of Filipino women in Japan was confined to small-group gossip, scholarly articles, and data provided by MSOs. This limited the awareness of Filipino women migrants, particularly those isolated in their rural households. Consequently, these migrants had little or no contact with other Filipino women (Faier, 2008; Ito, 2005), depriving them of a community with which they could share their thoughts and struggles or even employment opportunities.

In PTJ, member activities consist of the performative use of texts, images, and videos to express personal and intimate stories. These are shared with a group of 24,000 co-ethnics. Their practices generate emotional connections and affective belonging among them, facilitating the creation of an intimate public (Cabalquinto & Soriano, 2020). In the Philippines, these stories are usually shared with family members and close friends, who are often the source of support, protection, and guidance.

Lauren Berlant's (2008) notion of intimate publics, while predating social media, has guided scholars in understanding the changing forms of intimacy among anonymous participants as it plays out in public spaces (Dobson et al., 2018; Hjorth et al., 2014). In her theorization of intimacy, Berlant (2008) argues that a sense of belonging and recognition is experienced through the consumption of a shared understanding of a world (as cited in Cabalquinto & Soriano, 2020, p. 8). The circulation of intimacy is facilitated by various genres of media, such as books, television shows, and various social media platforms (Dobson et al., 2018; Petersen et al., 2018). Thus, intimate publics can be understood as "porous, affective scenes of identification among strangers…centered around media and culture… that promise certain experiences of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline and discussion about how to live as 'x'" (Berlant, 2008, as cited in Dobson et al., 2018, p. 5). In other words, the formation of belonging and solidarity in online ethnic enclaves is a product of the affective practices (Kanai, 2017) and negotiation of intimacy within intimate publics.

The appropriation of social media among Filipino women migrants has generated new patterns of socialization and identification through the creation of intimate public spaces. I consider this practice as an attempt to "restructure their local places of abode under new conditions" (Machimura, 2006, pp. 56-57, as cited in Takahata, 2018, p. 258). For migrants, this process of re-territorialization is a way of negotiating their position and identities (Alinejad, 2011). In other countries, such as the United States, migrant ethnic enclaves in physical spaces (e.g., Chinatown, Little Manila, Koreatown) had an important contributing factor to the economic assimilation of first-generation migrants (Portes, 1981). These ethnic enclaves reinforced ethnic solidarity and enabled the creation of spatially-confined markets (Sanders & Nee, 1987). Similarly, PTJ can be considered an online ethnic enclave in that it can be defined as "immigrant group(s), which concentrate in a distinct (spatial) location and organize a variety of enterprises serving their own ethnic market and/or the general population" (Portes, 1981, pp. 290-291).

In this study, I argue that PTJ as a communicative and interactive space is integral to Filipino women migrants in Japan attempting to re-embed themselves in their locality as a response to the de-territorializing effects of migration and limited social integration. The activities in PTJ reveal that online ethnic enclaves are not merely used for gathering or disseminating information. Filipino women migrants also use the group to seek practical and emotional support from unknown others as an alternative to kinship and local community groups, thus, creating an intimate public (Berlant, 2008) among strangers. Through the affordances of Facebook, they were able to build a community that has become a vital source for navigating life's intricacies while negotiating their position as women, mothers, and migrants in Japan.

Women's participation on social media

Online ethnic enclaves on Facebook Groups rely on the mediated circulation of intimacy and care through online participation and interactions among strangers. The circulation of intimacy and care in the digital sphere is mainly studied in the context of transnational families. Such discussions are concerned with how co-presence, or the experience of emotional proximity with physically distant loved ones, is used to maintain transnational family ties (Alinejad, 2019; Baldassar, 2008). Several studies suggest the positive effects of ubiquitous connectivity to transnational families, such as bringing migrants and their families closer (Madianou & Miller, 2012), allowing migrant mothers to parent beyond economic provisions (San Pascual, 2014), easing the emotional burden of separation (Bacigalupe & Camara, 2012), and allowing the mediation of care work (Uy-Tioco & Cabalquinto, 2020). The abundance of studies on intimacy within the context of transnational families parallels the traditional notions of intimacy, which relegates it to the private, domestic domain.

Michael Salter (2018) argues that the public-private divide is gendered in nature because women have historically been excluded from public places and discourses. Furthermore, queer theorists (see Berlant, 2008; Plummer, 2003) state that intimacy is "socially sanctioned, defined by institutions, laws, and normative social pressures" (Dobson et al., 2018, p. 3). Developments in media technology have influenced the expansion of the public sphere and the relation of private citizens to public life (Salter, 2018, p. 34). Compared to its Web 1.0 predecessors (e.g., websites, email, chat rooms), the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies (including social media) has facilitated information dissemination across different scales of sociality (Liu, 2020; see also Miller et al., 2016). Its interactive platform has stimulated the mass exchange of personal and intimate details in several forms of media (e.g., texts, images, videos) through the use of more portable and accessible electronic devices and technologies (e.g., digital cameras, smartphones, wireless technology).

Thus, Salter (2018) stated that Web 2.0 technologies have encouraged the participation of women from various demographics, "increasing discussion of the concerns of women, sexual minorities, racialized groups and others who previously had limited access to mass mediated public sphere" (p. 36). Aside from public discussions, the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies has fostered community-building activities among stigmatized and marginalized groups in digital spaces. For instance, *Ajummas* (roughly translates as "middle-aged, married women"), considered one of the most stigmatized groups in contemporary Korea, have appropriated the messaging feature of the social media platform KakaoTalk to create a communal space where they build friendships and maintain a space for women (Moon, 2020).

According to Dobson et al. (2018), the ubiquity of social media is seen to intensify tensions between the public and the private because it allows intimate parts of life to be "learnt, produced, given value, contested and exploited" (p. 4). These pedagogic opportunities can either challenge and disrupt or reinforce and concretize existing power dynamics in relationships and normative notions of intimacy. They further stated that an assemblage of "social, historical, material and design" (p. 5) may produce new and particular modes of intimacies beyond kinship ties.

However, Salter (2018) warns us that increasing publicization of gendered issues is not without risks, as it can lead to the violation of one's privacy. It opens up the potential for exploitation, commodification, and abuse, highlighting paradoxes that exist in digital intimate publics. Therefore, while belonging in digital intimate publics can be emancipatory, it also has the potential to be "personally devastating and politically oppressive" (p. 29). The ambivalent relationship between technology and gender leads to a constant negotiation of the ways in which women participate digitally.

Visual intimacy: Practices of image-sharing

Margaret Gibson and Golie Talaie (2018) explain that a "public is a relation amongst strangers bound together by shared symbols, cultural forms, objects, practices of identification and affective states" (p. 281). Social networking sites, such as Facebook, are said to have transformed notions of intimacy among strangers as they blur the boundaries between public and private life (p. 282). Sharing is one of the ways digital subjects participate on social media. As a participative and interactive mode, it generates affective meanings that are centered around feelings and practices of care (Kennedy, 2018). In this sense, creating a harmonious online relationship involves a constant negotiation of intimacy, which includes strategic and mutual self-disclosure (Giddens, 1992). Jenny Kennedy (2018) suggested that sharing on social media involves a "negotiation of social relations, digital literacies, desires and expectations as people grapple with each nuance and shift in technologies" (p. 266). Using image-sharing as an example of the interplay of these factors, Malik et al. (2016) identified the six goals of users sharing images on Facebook: "affection seeking, attention seeking, disclosure, habit, information sharing, and social influence" (p. 129). In PTJ, images are used for practical reasons as well as to convey emotional intimacies. Practical utilization helps break linguistic, cultural, and institutional barriers as they assist them in navigating and managing life in Japan. Certain images convey memories that "reflect and construct intersections between the past and future—remembering and projecting lived experiences" (van Dijck, 2007, p. 21). For instance, on March 7, 2018, a former entertainer posted a request for members to share images of when they were working as entertainers. While not all members of PTJ work or have worked in the entertainment industry, this lighthearted post received over 40 reactions and 100 comments. Many of the comments contained personal images from the 1980s and 1990s. Commenters reminisced on their younger days, the heyday of the entertainment industry, and the challenges and joys of their former jobs. Scenes like this create visual intimacy that allows members to "project moments, situations, and an affective orientation of managing life" that they not only recognize but also recognize themselves in (Kanai, 2017, p. 1).

The example above shows how image-sharing practices mitigated the effects of feelings of isolation and had created momentary meaningful bonds. However, sharing also opens one's life to public exposure and scrutiny. In PTJ, members are encouraged to treat other members with respect and avoid offensive comments as a way of creating a safe space for women. In addition, they must negotiate with the idea of publicizing their intimate realities to a large unknown audience. As such, members have developed practices such as invoking non-familial relational ties or moderating group privacy features to create an alternative to their kinship and community groups.

Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative, ethnographic approach to explore the shared culture of the online ethnic enclave, *Pinoy Tambayan in Japan*. The data gathering was done through offline and online participant observation and in-depth interviews with two administrators and six group members. I initially joined PTJ in 2016 after being invited by a friend. In order to build connections within the group, I participated in different activities, including purchasing products from online sellers, commenting on posts, and sharing information (such as information on city hall events, divorce, and Covid19).

I conducted a thematic analysis using data gathered from 1) social media multi-modal texts comprised of posts and comments in the group discussion, and 2) interviews. Thematic analysis involves the identification of common patterns encountered across a set of data (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000), which can give it a more "detailed and nuanced account" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, as cited in Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p. 401). Determining the type of activities that occurs in the group was straightforward, but understanding "how relations of intimacy are shaped and performed within the structures of digital platforms" (Dobson et al., 2018, p. xxii) required me to carry out a thematic analysis of discussion threads and to cross-reference the results with the socio-cultural contexts of Filipino migrants in Japan.

For ethical considerations, I have asked the consent of group administrators to use the group as a focus of my Ph.D. research. I explained the research problem, objectives, and data-gathering procedures, including how I intend to find respondents from the group, post research questions and questionnaires on the group discussion board, and analyze the discussion threads. The administrators allowed me to conduct my study under the condition that I use a pseudonym in place of the group's name.

After receiving permission to study the group, I posted a call on the discussion board to gather interview respondents. However, the only person who responded to the post was my friend. Thus, I changed to purposive snowball sampling, starting with my friend. All interviews were conducted online via Facebook Messenger from July 2020 to October 2020. It is important to note that I did not request written consent from any of the respondents due to the vulnerable situation of some of the group members.

At the beginning of each interview, I explained the details of my research to the respondent. I then asked if I could record the interview and only did so after receiving their explicit verbal consent. Respondents were assured that any data gathered during the interview would be kept confidential and used solely for this study. Due to the sensitive nature of the discussion topics during the interviews, I was cautious about taking into consideration the emotional and psychological stress that may be incurred. Thus, I gave my respondents the option to refuse to answer questions or stop the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable. In order to protect their identities, I have ascribed pseudonyms to every respondent. Finally, I had given respondents the option to withdraw their consent should they later decide that they no longer wish to participate in the study.

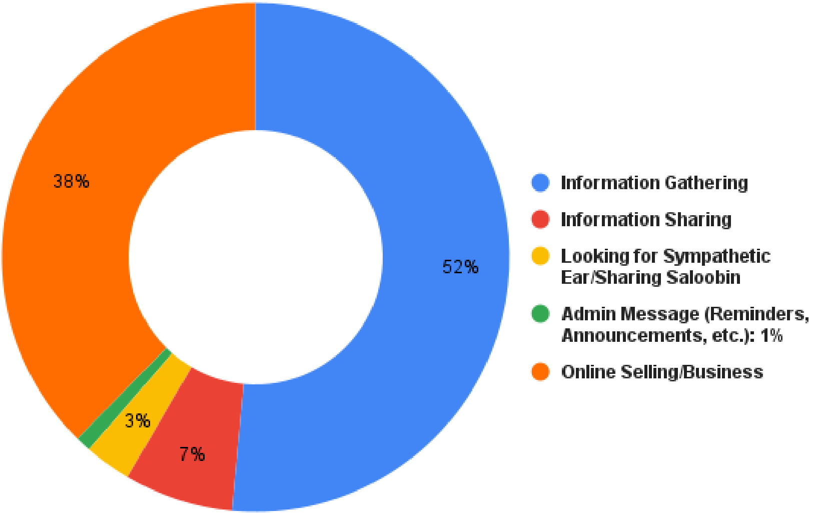
The creation of *Pinoy Tambayan in Japan*

PTJ serves as an online ethnic enclave consisting of Filipino migrants in Japan. While the group is open to all genders, women are the most active participants, as indicated by their comparatively numerous posts, reactions, and comments. One of the group admin (short for administrator), Jan (F, 43), said that the goal of the group was to create a space where Filipino migrants could meet and discuss information and entrepreneurial opportunities to ease the challenges of living in Japan. It is worth noting that there are other online ethnic enclaves on Facebook, which function solely as online marketplaces for Filipinos. However, PTJ differs from such groups because its creators wanted to build a communal space where fellow migrants could share information, feelings, problems, opportunities, and interests. As such, the emergence of social media platforms became an auspicious opportunity for this geographically dispersed populace. Their choice of Facebook Groups was primarily due to its availability, ease of access, and free cost. While it was not their goal to expand the group to 24,000 members (as of January 2022), the admins allowed it through vetted membership. According to Jan, the criteria for membership are that the prospective member is based in Japan, the request comes from a personal account and not a large business account, and the requesting individual agrees to follow the rules set forth by the admins. There are various technological features that Facebook Groups offer, but the feature most utilized by PTJ's members is the discussion board, where they can post individually authored multi-modal texts (e.g., text, images, videos). Posts must undergo a screening process by an admin or moderator before being published on the discussion board. Jan says they rarely reject requests to post, but they always make sure that posts follow the rules and are not advertisements for large companies. They also ensure that posts do not contain discourteous or vulgar content. Once posts are approved for publication, they become visible to all the members. The average number of daily posts is about 50 (data gathered from July 2020 to January 2022). Jan states that authors, especially online sellers, are compelled to experiment creatively using various technological features on Facebook and other application software to increase the post's visibility. For instance, authors will use searchable hashtags, post TikTok videos, or ask friends within the group to react to or comment on their posts.

Aside from the online participant observation I carried out from 2016 to 2021, I also extracted and coded 302 posts from the discussion board. These posts were created between 2014 and 2020 and were filtered using Facebook's 'Top Posts'[4] feature. The objective of this analysis was to catalog the major themes and purposes of member activity as indicated by these posts. As shown in Graph 1, the most prominent activities were:

1. acquiring information or assistance,
2. conducting business (selling products or marketing services),
3. sharing information,
4. posting administrative messages or precautions, and
5. sharing *saloobin* (inner thoughts, attitudes, emotions, or disposition).

Graph 1. Frequency of the top five activities in the discussion board of *Pinoy Tambayan in Japan,* 2014-2020



Note: These were coded from the first 302 Top Posts published from 2014 to 2020 on the discussion board of Facebook group, *Pinoy Tambayan in Japan*. The data set was extracted on 14 October 2020 and 9 October 2021.

A significant number of posts discussed gendered issues, such as motherhood, visa status, civil status, and intermarriage relationships. This data set highlights the needs and concerns of Filipino women migrants. Unsurprisingly, the lack of information on living in Japan is one of the main challenges faced by migrants. This, in turn, impedes the social and economic integration processes. This is verified by Jan, who said that the lack of knowledge about places to acquire information about life in Japan is one of the reasons for creating the group. The creators had hoped that an online platform would allow people outside their immediate communities to join the group, increasing potential sources for information.

Male migrants are also welcome to join the group and must go through the same vetting process as their female counterparts. However, male members are usually passive observers and rarely participate in the discussion board, having authored only 20 of the 302 posts in the data set used for Graph 1. Their posts featured inquiries on travel restrictions, life in Japan, and engaging in online businesses, but did not include topics related to parenthood or family matters.

Discussion: Gendered dimension of online ethnic enclaves

The intimacy produced within this online ethnic enclave can be seen as non-traditional and democratized compared to heterosexual relationships or blood-related kinships (Chambers, 2013, as cited in Petersen et al., 2018). The intimacy produced in these relationships is based on "personal choice and individual control" (p. 5). Since Filipino women migrants in Japan are subject to the domestic sphere as marriage migrants and homemakers, they are expected to overcome experiences of power imbalances within their households and host society on their own (Celero, 2014). Part of the societal expectation that comes from this is their full-time responsibilities as sole child caretakers and homemakers, usually at the expense of their migrant aspirations. The technological affordances of Facebook have allowed the expansion of time, space, and knowledge within and outside their households, enabling participation in online groups where intimate friendships are fostered.

In the following subsections, I will discuss how Filipino women migrants negotiate the technological features of these emerging online ethnic enclaves that enable them to construct an intimate public. Negotiating privacy issues and trust among strangers in such enclaves involves invoking culturally embedded relational ties. Additionally, the ubiquity of online ethnic enclaves and their capacity to accommodate a large number of members allows for continuous communication and interaction that enables the actualization of an alternative support system among geographically dispersed strangers in the absence of kinship and community groups.

a. Invoking women's relational ties among strangers through *Sis, Mamsh, Kasodan*

The constitutive process of emerging social intimacies in digital spaces involves negotiating the boundaries of life's public and private realms. A nuanced understanding of this development in PTJ can be observed through the invocation of relational ties through the terms *sis*, *mamsh*, and *kasodan* to negotiate privacy, trust, and cultural expectations. Since the domain of private and intimate life is traditionally confined to the home and the friends we trust, addressing strangers through terms of endearment invokes a relational tie between the sharer and the unknown audience, allowing them to go through a process of affective identification. This practice generates a cultural and emotional bond that makes it easier for the sharer to divulge intimate narratives and obligates the audience to extend help. This interaction results in the creation of a "collective fantasy of togetherness" (Kanai, 2017, p. 11) among strangers.

Members who want to gather information operationalize the terms of endearment, *sis* (sister), *mamsh* (fellow godmother and friend), and *kasodan* (fellow seekers of information), to invoke relational ties. This relational tie is not bound by blood but by shared commonalities between the author and the audience. For example, by using the term *kasodan*, an author is able to connect with their fellow members by appealing to the culture of *damayan* (roughly translates as compassion). *Kasodan* is a combination of the Filipino affix *ka-* (from *kapwa)* and the Japanese word *soudan* (consultation, discussion, or asking for advice). *Kapwa* is defined as "recognition of shared identity, an inner self shared with others" (Enriquez, 1992, p. 52). This means that, in the concept of *kapwa*, there is a recognition that the self and the other are one (Aguila, 2015) and not *ibang tao* (not one of us, or outsider). *Damayan* is mobilized by one's social interactions with a *kapwa* who shares the same identity, resulting in an "ethos of mutual caring and sharing of obligations" (Rafael, 1997, p. 275). In this sense, extending help to fellow Filipino women migrants becomes a culturally obligatory practice.

The invocation of relational ties mobilizes the mechanism that sustains and manages the flow of exchanges in the group. These relational ties are also indicative of the gendered experiences of Filipino women migrants in Japan. In PTJ, practices of *damayan* are manifested in the willing exchange of information, lending a sympathetic ear, voluntary assistance, and support for self-realization projects.

b. Creation of kinship and community support

The most significant technological affordances of online ethnic enclaves on Facebook Groups are its privacy features, ubiquity, and ability to accommodate a large number of members. These features augment assistance and care normally provided by kinship and community groups. Privacy features give members a sense of security, resulting in the creation of a perceived safe space. This allows them to share personal matters and seek advice on sensitive topics such as motherhood and relationship problems, which are typically only shared among family members and close friends. The ubiquity of Facebook Groups means that communication and interaction on the platform are readily available across space and time (Liew, 2020). Online ethnic enclaves on Facebook Groups act as a safety net in times of emergencies, as they can be accessed swiftly and easily through mobile phones and other electronic devices. Therefore, members can seek help from wherever they are. This is particularly beneficial for anybody who does not have an immediate network that they can rely on. Finally, a large audience ensures that the post will garner a response regardless of when it is posted. The case of Flora (Vignette 1) shows how these affordances have resulted in the creation of an alternative kinship and community support system.

Vignette 1: Case of Flora (F, married to a Japanese, mother of two)

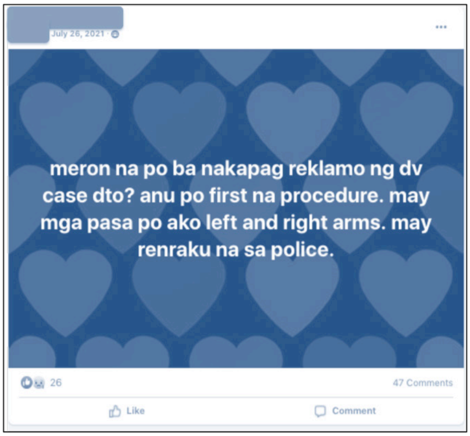
Flora joined the group on 1 August 2016, after arriving in Japan. She entered the country with a spouse-of-a-Japanese visa and is currently based in Tokyo. She has one child with her current husband and one child who is currently living in the Philippines, born out of wedlock. With no family support group, she relies on PTJ for information regarding myriad topics, including visas, work opportunities, relationship matters, medical emergencies, childcare, sharing her *saloobin*, translation, beauty products, and more. She also participates in the group by commenting on other people's queries and by helping increase the visibility of posts she resonates with.

Flora openly shares details of her life with members of the group, often asking for practical advice and support. One of her recurring posts is about her relationship with her husband, whose attitude changed after marriage. She complains that her husband verbally abuses her whenever he comes home stressed from work and that he has been seeing other women. She says her husband justifies the upbraiding and infidelity by reminding her of the financial support he provided her and her family before their marriage. For these reasons, she suffers from depression and has been on medication since 2019. Many group members have advised her to stay married to her husband to ensure her children's future in Japan.

For instance, when Flora's son became sick, commenters guided her on how to go to the hospital without her husband's help. Some commenters offered translation support over the phone, utilizing the free voice and video call services on Messenger[5]. Other commenters offered advice on how to prepare effective home remedies using resources found in Japanese stores and supermarkets. In these ways, members from all over the country were able to assist Flora. Just as important as the aforementioned practical support, she also received emotional support that is usually only offered by close friends and family.

Another example of PTJ becoming an alternative support system is when it enables members to protect fellow members from domestic abuse and violence (see Image 1). Mina Roces (2003, p. 92) stated that a woman's kinship group protects her and demands retribution when she is subjected to such instances. In the same way, PTJ has acted in the kinship's stead in performing protective duties by becoming their allies during times of distress. Since PTJ is a closed, private group for Filipinos, their Japanese spouses are not a part of it. This allows members to feel safe enough to share their domestic problems. Although phones in Japan are equipped with an emergency support button, some migrants cannot speak Japanese or lack knowledge of the institutional processes involved in reporting abuse. Some feel hesitant about contacting the police because their visas are anchored to their marriage with their Japanese spouses.

Image 1. Post about seeking help on a domestic violence (DV) case.



meron na po ba nakapag reklamo ng dv case dto? anu po first na procedure. may mga pasa po ako left and right arms. may renraku na sa police.

Translation:

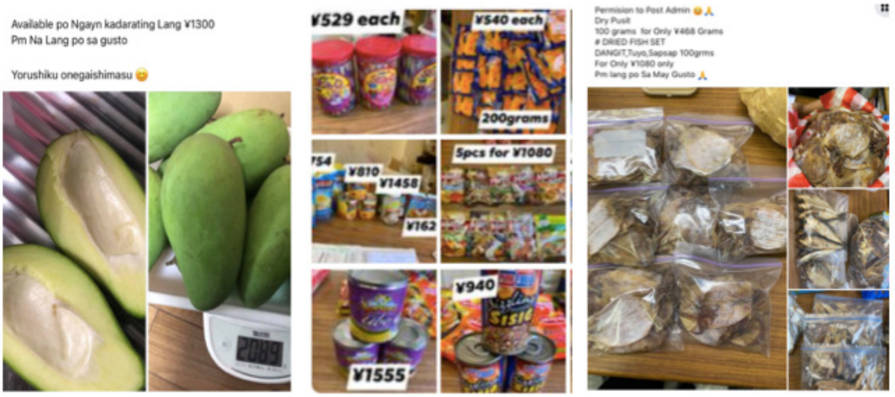
Is there anyone (here) who has experienced filing a complaint on a domestic violence case? What is the first procedure? I have bruises on my left and right arms. I have already contacted the police.

Note: Posted on 26 July 2021 (source: Author's own. The image is a screenshot of a post in PTJ).

The group does not only become a source of information on shelters, legal retribution, and existing support systems. There are also instances when members who live in the same area have given face-to-face support. Equally important, the group becomes a source of empowerment, encouraging victims of domestic violence to seek help instead of dismissing it as "ordinary and normal within the context of marriage" (Parreñas, 2002, p. 36).

The last example depicts the creation of a sense of place and belonging akin to a Filipino tambayan, where interactions can be lighthearted and humorous but generate emotional intimacy through relatable experiences. As mentioned previously, image-sharing behavior in PTJ demonstrates both the practical and emotional aspects of their relationship. For instance, the practical use of photos includes activities such as: seeking help for translation, identifying unfamiliar Japanese items, and marketing their products. The practical use of images allows Filipino migrants to address the language, cultural, and institutional barriers that hinder integration. Aside from these examples, they are able to create online businesses that resemble a sari-sari store (local neighborhood sundry) that sells an assortment of Filipino ingredients and general store products (see Image 2).

Image 2. Examples of online seller posts in the discussion board



Available po Ngayn kadarating Lang ¥1300
Pm Na Lang po sa gusto

Yorushiku onegaishimasu 😊

Permision to Post Admin 😊🙏
Dry Pusit
100 grams for Only ¥468 Grams
DRIED FISH SET
DANGIT,Tuyo,Sapsap 100grms
For Only ¥1080 only
Pm lang po Sa May Gusto 🙏

Note: The first (L-R) photo was shared by Mara in her post, while the rest were posted in the comment section (source: Author's own. Screenshot of images posted on Mara's post, PTJ).

These online businesses rely heavily on images to showcase their products to their audience.

Posting images demonstrates moments of emotional intimacies. Sharing images in digital spaces is linked to the idea of negotiating intimacy in public through self-disclosure (Lasén, 2015). In the context of personal relationships, Van House (2007) identified the experience of togetherness as the main reason users share images on social media. In the same way, the image-sharing practice of PTJ members generates intimacy with unknown others through relatable or common experiences. For instance, sharing images of the homeland or about adapting to life in Japan evokes feelings of shared identity and origins (as shown in Vignette 2).

Vignette 2: How to cook tinola

Mara shared a photo of a popular Filipino dish called *tinola* (Filipino chicken soup). She excitedly shared her discovery that Japanese *tougan* (wax gourd) can be used in place of the usual *sayote* (chayote) in *tinola.* She explained that the dish she made was tasty despite using foreign ingredients. The post garnered 36 reactions and 35 comments. Some commented that they did the same, while others suggested additional Japanese ingredients that can be used for the native dish. Commenters also shared photos of the *tinola* they prepared using ingredients found in Japanese supermarkets (see Image 3). A few comments inquired what a *tougan* looks like, and some suggested other ways of cooking *tinola* using their own recipe. At the end of the thread, the author said that she would try the different suggestions posted in the comment section.

Image 3. Photos of different versions of a Filipino chicken soup dish called tinola shared by members commenting on mara's post.

Note: The first (L-R) photo was shared by Mara on her post, while the rest were posted in the comment section. (source: Author's own. Screenshot of images posted on Mara's post, PTJ).

The discussion thread conjures images of a local tambayan where neighbors come together to talk about mundane topics, in the same vein as tweaking a chicken soup recipe using resources available in Japan. This seemingly trivial post not only signifies identification with the struggles of fellow Filipino migrants but also celebrates the small victories of being able to adapt to their new environment.

Conclusion

In this study, I chose to highlight the constraining and enabling ways intimate publics in online ethnic enclaves mediate the dissatisfying gap between Filipino women migrants' realities and aspirations. Through the case of *Pinoy Tambayan in Japan*, this research showed how online ethnic enclaves have become a vital resource for Filipino women migrants in Japan. The existing geographical and institutional barriers hindering the formation of ethnic enclaves have contributed to the significance of Facebook Groups in producing intimacy among strangers. Through these groups, Filipino women migrants are able to create a community in their new locality, helping them cope with the social and structural marginalization they face as migrant women.

I discussed the nuanced ways in which Filipino women migrants negotiate the technological features of emerging online ethnic enclaves. The members of such enclaves negotiate issues of privacy and trust among strangers by invoking culturally embedded relational ties. In PTJ, feelings of belonging or togetherness are fostered in moments where the pleasures of recognition and reciprocity are fulfilled through the imagined identification with unknown others as sis, mamsh, and kasodan. Additionally, the ubiquity of online ethnic enclaves and their capacity to accommodate a large number of members allows for continuous communication and interaction that enables the actualization of an alternative support system among geographically dispersed strangers in the absence of kinship and community groups.

Berlant (2008) stated that members of intimate public spaces are central to the shared reality of migrants as it addresses their need for recognition. However, such spaces may be used by migrants to contend with marginalization and injustices without it becoming “political” (as cited in Kanai, 2017, p. 5). This implies that despite PTJ’s ability to empower individuals to negotiate migrant experiences outside the group, there is limited collective action to bring forth legal, social, and political change. This is particularly true when compared to their formal counterparts, which actively push for greater rights. While this can be attributed to the fact that PTJ does not actively lobby for sociopolitical rights, it can also be attributed to the limits of online communicative spaces. Therefore, even if social media provides opportunities for participation and change, users are still subjected to the conditions defined by their local environment (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013). In mainstream media and the wider host society, the intimate gendered narratives of Filipino women migrants are rarely discussed, and consequently, these women are misrecognized and stigmatized.

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Notes:

[1] *Sis* is short for sister, *mamsh* or *mamshie* is short for *kumare*, which translates to fellow godmother and friend, and *kasodan* means fellow seekers of information, and is a combination of the Filipino affix *ka-* (from *kapwa)* and the Japanese word, *soudan* (consultation, discussion, or asking for advice).

[2] Since I came to Japan as a student, I have had access to readily available assistance from the organization that sponsored my visa. This established the base of my inquiry. By understanding the differences in my experiences with the majority of Filipino women migrants in Japan, I was able to grasp the relevance of online ethnic enclaves on Facebook.

[3] The respondents and administrators of the group requested anonymity; thus, a pseudonym was used for both the Facebook group and respondents. Additionally, I have redacted the name and any other information that may identify the author of the posts used in this paper.

[4] The 'Top Posts' filter on the search function allows posts with the highest engagement (comments and reactions) to appear first (Facebook Help Center, 2022).

[5] Messenger is a free messaging web-based platform for Facebook users.

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