USAP-USAP: A Sociolinguistic Examination of Discourses on Transnational Identities among Filipino Migrants in Japan

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Abstract

Migrants transition between ways of life in their home and destination countries, negotiating their identities to meet the demands of everyday life and their new domicile. Identity, although exceptionally abstract, fractured, and dynamic, becomes analyzable through the mundane social activity of discourse. The current study looked at how Filipino migrants from various origins discussed transnational identity via spoken discourse termed as usap-usap. Usap-usap in Tagalog means 'light conversation' and served as the data-gathering method in the study. The co-construction of transnational identity via usap-usap involved four informants (a highly skilled professional, an educator, a student, and a family member of a Japanese national) who represent different categories of Filipino migrants in Japan. The usap-usap with and among the migrants showed the emergence of a transnational identity, characterized by biculturalism strategies and multilingualism. Biculturalism was reflected by the Filipino migrants narratives describing how they modified their practices vis-à-vis spirituality and religiosity, punctuality, and linguistic differences between the Philippines and Japan. Linguistically, the usap-usap made prominent the flawless switching of the Filipino migrants between Tagalog, English, and Japanese as they contemplated their personal histories and exchanged opinions with one another. It is argued that multilingualism is an illustration of the migrant's multicultural reality, one that allows for the creative meshing of cultural ways from the origin and destination countries. Beyond the current research, the usap-usap served not only as a data-gathering tool for the current research but also as an avenue for the Filipino migrants to introspect, position themselves in relation to others, and co-construct an identity that is, at times, imposed on them by scholarly descriptions. Finally, the study demonstrated that discourse does not only reflect the transnational identity but also actively constructs it and makes it lucid, palpable, and more concrete.

Keywords: Transnational identity, discourse, Filipino migration, biculturalism, multilingualism

Introduction

Filipinos comprise one of the largest migrant groups in Japan. According to the Immigration Services Agency of Japan (2023), a total of 322,046 Filipino nationals were registered in 2023, constituting close to 11% of the overall count of registered foreigners in the country. In terms of population size, Filipinos trail behind the Chinese, South Koreans, and Vietnamese. They live in various parts of Japan, with the highest concentrations being in Aichi, Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, and Chiba. Moreover, the gradual lifting of strict COVID-19 border measures by Japan in late 2022 and early 2023 has put Japan in the vista of Filipinos who are planning to migrate for a variety of reasons.

Japan is an attractive destination for many emigrating Filipinos. Primary motivations for migration include employment, education, and family. Moreover, Japan's geographical proximity to and historical ties with the Philippines, soft power influence, and economic vibrancy are also significant considerations. Since the 1970s, the demographics of Filipino migrants have gradually changed, reflecting the changes in the demand for foreign labor by industries, as well as the Japanese society's aspiration to become increasingly globalized. The Cabinet Office of Japan (2004), in its 2004 white paper on the Japanese economy and public finance, underscored that a "comprehensive, forward-looking consideration in accepting more foreign workers is required" (translated). In particular, the foreign workforce was deemed as a remedy to the aging population dilemma. Foreign workers have since been actively accepted as their knowledge and technical abilities are envisioned to positively impact Japan's economic development. Japan's increasingly favorable stance towards accepting foreign workers, especially the so-called unskilled laborers, is reflected by the relaxation of some restrictions on quotas or periods of stay, as well as some linguistic requirements. Now, numerous Filipinos help propel the Japanese manufacturing and service industries, while a sizable number of them are found in the medical, construction, hospitality, and education sectors. Filipinos are also affiliated with Japanese academic and research institutions as professors, researchers, and students. The professors are employed in various universities and research centers across Japan, while the researchers are involved in scholarly and innovative activities in prestigious institutions centered around space technology, disaster mitigation, and agriculture. The population of Filipino students in Japan consists of individuals who enter language schools as a stepping stone for more long-term goals, undergraduate and graduate students, and research fellows—a good portion of whom eventually settle in Japan for gainful employment or to advance their careers. Family-related reasons also urge Filipinos to migrate to Japan. Some Filipinos move to Japan to join their family members who are already residing in the country as dependents or prospective workers. They include spouses or children of Filipinos who are holding permanent or long-term residency or Japanese nationals. Second-generation Japanese-Filipino children also come to Japan to (re)connect with their roots.

The composition of the Filipino migrant population in Japan has become more diversified, reflecting the diversification of opportunities for Filipinos to achieve their migration-related aspirations. Filipino migrants, moving away from the "pub worker" image ascribed to them by older generations of Japanese people, permeate different sectors of Japanese society to become not only economic, academic, and technological partners but also active members of the community who share innumerable common goals and aspirations with the locals. In so doing, and in the course of living in a foreign land, the Filipinos in Japan undergo transformations that permeate their identities—changes that go deep into the fabrics of one's and are reflected in how the Filipino transnationals view themselves, the others, and the world.

The Filipino Identity: Layered, Dynamic, and Socially Constructed

The Philippines is a highly multi-ethnic and multilingual archipelago, and Filipinos who come to Japan also have varying ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Filipinos generally distinguish between their national and ethnolinguistic identities in the Philippines, which are internalized simultaneously. The word identity, however, is a very murky term. On a casual and perhaps digestible level, even for the layperson, identity answers the question, "Who am I?" (Motyl, 2010). However, this simplistic description defines identity in its accomplished state rather than characterizing it as a constantly dynamic and ongoing process. Moreover, it heavily focuses on the self as if it is definable without reference to others. Although written at a much earlier time and from a psychological point of view, Erikson (1968) formulated a definition of

identity that anticipated the current trends of identity research. He described identity as an internal organizing principle that steadily develops throughout an individual's lifespan—a principle that provides internal cohesion, a guide for interacting with others, and a frame for differentiating the self from the others. The social nature of identity is also captured by Hogg and Abrams' (1988) definition of identity: "people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (p. 2). Meanwhile, incorporating the dynamic nature of identity into its social dimension, Katzenstein (1996) defined identity as "mutually constructed and evolving images of the self and other" (p. 59). Identity studies have then significantly shifted at the turn of the twenty-first century. While classic research rested heavily on the conception of identity as static and stable, more recent studies take on a more anti-essentialist and social constructionist view (De Fina, 2016) and see identities as frequently fragmented and inconsistent (Baxter, 2016). A social constructivist conceptualization allows for a more nuanced understanding of the transformation of identities as driven by forces internal and external to the individual.

Simultaneity of Belongingness: The Transnational Identity

Migration to Japan adds another layer to the Filipino identity. A well-explored research theme, cross-border migration has been known to affect an individual's identity. Theoretically, one can acquire the prevalent sociocultural identity in the receiving country or region or undergo identity modification by acculturation processes, given the appropriate conditions. Vertovec (2004) underscores how the cross-border experience creates cultural repertoires within the migrant and gives birth to 'dual identities.' Moreover, regardless of whether the transnational experience is sustained or not, the socialization process itself can leave "a substantial influence on longer-term configurations" of identity (Vertovec, 2009, p. 77).

In the same vein, Zhu (2017) describes this modification and blurring of identity as a sense of "double belonging" (or perhaps even multiple belonging), which stems from having transnational connections and exposure to social practices of more than one system. Living at the boundaries of two (or more) cultures, the identity construction of migrants is unquestionably affected by the meshing of different ways of living—the bicultural character of immigrants who must negotiate their two forms of cultural socialization is hence referred to as "transnational identity" (Esteban-Guitart & Ignasi, 2015).

In negotiating one's identity, Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2003) identified three strategies for identity construction among migrants: 1) ethnic flight; 2) active opposition; and 3) biculturalism. In ethnic flight, migrants dissociate with the culture of their society of origin because they deem it "inferior" and strongly identify with the dominant culture. In active opposition, identity is built around retaliation towards the dominant culture, oftentimes underpinned by rejection and marginalization. Finally, biculturalism is the most adaptive strategy of identity construction where the migrants absorb elements of the different cultural systems (e.g., becoming multilingual) to become more successful in participating in their current cultural or social context. Biculturalism as an adaptive strategy is the backbone of the transnational identity of the migrant.

Filipinos, while living in Japan, can still maintain meaningful ties with their homeland by serializing and replicating practices commonly done in the Philippines in their daily lives (Tigno, 2008). Therefore, living away from the homeland results in a complex intertwining and interplay of various identities—ethnolinguistic, national, local, and occupational, to name a few—that are concomitantly pondered, lived, and articulated by the Filipino migrant in Japan. Examining how the many and multi-layered changes brought about by the transnational experience impact the Filipino identity is the subject of interest in this study.

Discourse: The Co-construction Site of Transnational Identity

Previous studies on the identity of Filipinos in Japan focused on different types of migrants. Strands of research and academic articles tackled the identity of Japanese-Filipinos and Nikkeijins (Lemay, 2018; Seiger, 2019; Seiger, 2017; Ubalde, 2013; Vilog, 2013; Cafe, 2022; Almonte-Acosta, 2008; Zulueta, 2012), women (Ogaya, 2021; Magno, 2000; Faier, 2008; Ito, 2005; Suzuki, 2005; Suzuki, 2000; Okada, 2022; Docot, 2009) labor workers (Lopez, 2012), family (Tyner, 2002), Filipino teachers and ALTs (Balgoa, 2019; Stewart, 2019), and Filipinos as transnationals (Balgoa, 2017; Tigno, 2008). Generally, the studies cited above looked into the identity construction of particular groups of Filipino migrants that revolved primarily around how they negotiated their identities in the current domicile—against the predominant Japanese culture and the peculiarities of their spaces and places of being.

The co-construction process of transnational identity among individuals is affected by the configuration of interlocutors. For instance, power dynamics and prejudice between the interlocutors (Waugh, 2010), their pre-existing linguistic and social resources (Schilling-Estes, 2004), and their projected identity in relation to the "other" (Mieroop, 2008), affect how they co-construct their identities with the other participants of the discourse. The current study, however, is interested in the heterogeneity of the backgrounds of the interlocutors, specifically, how the Filipino transnational identity is co-constructed when the interlocutors come from highly varying backgrounds. When one ponders their identity, the act necessarily invokes a synchronous reflection of the self and the other and the relations between the two entities. The simultaneous rumination of identity based on the self and the other can be concretely induced by verbal exchanges among different interlocutors.

The current research adopts the more succinct and sociolinguistic stances taken by Bucholtz and Hall on identity (2005): 1) "Identity is the social positioning of the self and other" (p. 586), and 2) identity emerges from discourse. This view highlights the contingent nature of identity that adapts to the relation between the self and the other. Hence, identity becomes more understood as a sociocultural phenomenon rather than a fixture in the individual's psyche. Bucholtz and Hall further add that identity is inherently relational, sociocultural, and partial. Most relevantly, they argue that the conception of the self and the other makes its way to the social world through some form of discourse. Identity then lends itself to scholarly scrutiny via the discourse made by interlocutors. Hence, identity is treated in this research as one that arises from discursive interactions. Discourse, as a commonplace social activity, renders identity in constant flux and vulnerable to alteration and modification through the different configurations of the interlocutors. For Feller (2014), identity is the outcome of "a dialog of cultures" that involves negotiations or co-constructions. As the construction of identity is a joint activity, no one has full control over its outcome.

Incorporating these theoretical orientations, this research intends to analyze, using discourse, 1) how Filipino migrants describe their transnational identity individually and 2) how they co-construct their transnational identity with fellow Filipino migrants from other backgrounds. Discourse, a social activity that allows people to unpack their identities, can be a site of dispute and agreement, as well as a site for the rethinking and aligning of identities.

Identity becomes more concrete and substantial through the verbalization of thoughts of the speakers. Through interpersonal communication and narrative, it becomes more tangible and comprehensible. In a social constructivist perspective, the particulars of the setting and the discourse styles influence how identity is conceptually established. Identity, in this sense, is not simply an attribute assumed by individuals or an inherent property of the self that is stable and unchanging but rather a malleable facet that is constantly subjected to social forces and

agency. While cultural identities, such as the Filipino identity, have histories, they are also an entity of the present and the future simultaneously and are therefore expected to undergo transformation (Hall, 1990). The transformation is best reflected by stories and narratives of the Filipino migrant, who is both an agent and the receiving end of change. Storytelling highlights the individual's unique experiences that shape their transnational identity. On the other hand, discourse is deemed a site of agreeing and disagreeing, as well as aligning and renegotiating transnational identities. In this sense, usap-usap can be deemed helpful in the current study. Usap-usap is a Tagalog word that means 'light conversation'. In the spectrum of formality and casualness, usap-usap is situated in the middle– less formal than an interview yet less casual than gossiping or chit-chatting. It has a structure built around a central topic, but it also accommodates divergence from the theme and spontaneous talk. In the study, it refers to an intimate yet meaningful exchange of stories, narratives, and opinions around the central theme of "transnational identity"—between the informant and the researcher and among the informants themselves—concerning realities and lives as they unfold.

Research Questions and Methodology

The current research aims to answer three questions:

1. How do Filipino migrants co-construct their transnational identity through discourse?
2. Do Filipino migrants see their transnational identity as advantageous or disadvantageous?
3. What are the linguistic and non-linguistic strategies employed in the discursive co-construction of transnational identity?

The study used purposive sampling to gather four (4) informants. Informants were Filipino migrants residing in the Kanto area of Japan, belonging to different categories: 1) highly skilled workers; 2) educators (e.g., university professors, ALTs, school teachers, language teachers); 3) students (e.g., university, research, and graduate students); and 4) family members of a Japanese national (e.g., hafu or mixed children and spouses). A small number was opted for to allow for a more nuanced and detailed investigation of the informants' identity construction process.

Usap-usap served as the data-gathering method and was conducted on two levels: 1) between the researcher and each informant and 2) among all the informants. The two levels of usap-usap were facilitated and recorded through Zoom meetings. The first-level interviews lasted for around an hour each, while the second-level interview lasted for around 2 hours. The informants were allowed to use Tagalog, English, Japanese, or a combination of these languages, as they deemed comfortable.

In the first-level interviews, each informant was asked about their migration story, how they view themselves, and how their views about themselves changed in the course of staying in Japan. The discussion also included how they adjusted to their new domicile, as well as how they navigated through the linguistic and cultural differences between Japan and the Philippines. Then, the four informants were invited to participate in the second-level interview, which is the focus group discussion (FGD). The salient and recurring points gathered in the first-level interviews served as the discussion points in the FGD. The discussion enabled the heterogeneous group to discourse identities through dynamic and more proactive exchanges. Through the sharing of narratives, informants could react to one another, question the views of other informants, and ponder their thoughts by comparing those with other perspectives. In the discussion, the exchange of narratives in the focus group discussion allowed the researcher to

identify linguistic devices that serve the informants' interactional goals and intention to construct particular images of themselves (Pavlenko, 2007).

Findings

Pseudonym	Code	Category	Age	Sex	Years Living in Japan
"Senior Manager"	SM	Highly Skilled Workers	38	Female	16
"Homeroom Teacher"	HT	Educators	34	Female	9
"Doctoral Student"	DS	Students	32	Male	4
"Entrepreneur"	EN	Family Member of a Japanese National	51	Female	27

Figure 1. The Demographics of the Informants

The table above shows the demographic characteristics of the informants of the study. Four Filipino nationals, aged 32 to 51, participated in the individual interviews and group discussions. Three were females, and one was male. The participants' length of stay in Japan ranged from four to 27 years. The informants were identified through purposive sampling. Individual interviews and a focus group discussion were conducted for the data gathering. The individual interviews lasted approximately an hour each, while the group discussion was held for two hours.

In the individual interviews, the researcher probed into the personal histories of the informants. Specifically, the informants were asked to talk about their migration story, their motivations for moving to Japan, and the circumstances surrounding their decision to do so.

Furthermore, the embodiment of the Filipino identity in various spaces in Japan—the public, the local community, the workplace, the corporate world, and the academe, among many others—was discussed. How the informants navigated through life in Japan and pondered their transnational identity was also investigated using Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco's (2003) framework, categorizing experiences as falling under ethnic flight, active opposition, or biculturalism.

Motivations for Moving to Japan

The motivations for moving to Japan were varied: SM and DS came to Japan primarily to pursue higher education, arriving in Japan in 2008 and 2020, respectively. SM eventually landed a job at a multinational pharmaceutical company after finishing her studies, while DS

is currently pursuing a Ph.D. degree at a university in Tokyo. SM had a clear goal of becoming the first Filipino to pass a certain licensure exam in Japan and endeavored to set an example for fellow aspiring Filipino scholars. She currently occupies a senior manager position at a Tokyo-based company, allowing her to travel around the world for business-related matters. On the other hand, DS first came to Japan as an exchange student in Tokyo in 2015 and has since frequently visited the country for leisure and work-related reasons. He eventually came back in 2020 to pursue a master's degree in Tokyo while engaging in cultural exchange activities between ASEAN and Japan.

Meanwhile, HT came to Japan in 2015 to work as an English teacher at a high school in Ibaraki. She has been working at the same school for nine years and has recently become a class adviser, a relatively rare feat for foreign teachers in Japan. For HT, moving to Japan allowed her independence and full control over her life decisions. Finally, EN married a Japanese national, prompting her to settle in Japan in 1998. She has worked in the corporate world and has then become an entrepreneur, shuttling back and forth between Japan and the Philippines to manage businesses and socio-civic activities.

Ethnic Flight and Active Opposition

An outstanding instance of ethnic flight was shared by HT in the individual interview:

Extract 1

HT: To be honest, siguro nung sa unang mga taon ko rito, I'd say na itinapon ko 'yung pagka-Pilipino ko in a way… medyo ikinahiya ko at some point 'yung pagiging Filipino. Umabot ako sa point na naging 'Japanese' ako in a way. (To be honest, during the first few years of living here, I'd say I threw away my being Filipino…I was somewhat ashamed of being Filipino. It reached a point where I became 'Japanese' [as a result]."

HT shared experiences of being negatively stereotyped in the community. According to her, people in the school equated the Philippines with the production of bananas and Filipinos with female entertainers working at the omise (bar). She also recalled a remark from a student who said, "Oh, there's a university in the Philippines?". The embarrassment from such stereotypes and the lack of Filipino community around, according to HT, affected her self-esteem and drove her to adhere more to the dominant culture—to be more Japanese-like in the workplace. However, HT said that her friends from the Philippines migrating to Japan became a turning point in her life—she felt reconnected with her roots and began to embrace being Filipino through her Filipino social network.

As for active opposition, no narratives describing strong or violent retaliation towards the dominant culture, stemming from rejection or marginalization, were obtained from the informants. Instead, instances of microaggressions and discriminatory treatment from the dominant population in their spaces of being were redressed by the informants through biculturalism strategies. The most adaptive of the three strategies, biculturalism paves the way for the creation of transnational identities that allow migrants to thrive better in the new environment.

Biculturalism and the Discursive Co-Construction of Filipino Transnational Identity

The group discussion centered on the exchange of opinions on what the Filipino transnational identity vis-à-vis migration to Japan is. Using the recurrent and/or salient themes of identity construction determined through the individual interviews, the researcher engaged the informants to closely examine the varying biculturalism strategies that underpin the emergence of a transnational identity.

Biculturalism was predominantly observed in the following discourse themes: religiosity and spirituality, blending in with Japanese society, and linguistic adaptation.

Spirituality and Religioisity

Extract 2

SM: Ever since I came to Japan, I have [had] a dedicated space for my altar. Nandun yung prayer area ko (That is my prayer area). During COVID, I was not able to go to the community service sa Roppongi (in Roppongi). I would just basically go to the altar space and that is my way of keeping my Filipino identity.

The Philippines is known to be chiefly Catholic, and religiosity has long been associated with the Filipino identity. However, Catholics are a small minority in Japan, and spaces for prayers and worship, such as churches, are few and far between. Although the informants acknowledge that, by and large, religiosity is part of Filipino life, their practice of religion in Japan has diverged from that in the Philippines.

Extract 3

HT: Personally lang, sa akin, hindi kasi ako nagpapractice ng Catholicism or Christianity, even before coming here to Japan. I believe in [a] god, pero hindi ako 'yung typical na Catholic or Christian natin. It's actually funny because mas nafifeel ko yung presence ng almighty being sa mga shrines and temples. Hindi ako ganun ka-Japanese na Japanese but I feel that it's sacred. (Personally, I don't practice Catholicism or Christianity even before coming to Japan. I believe in a god, but I am not the typical Catholic or Christian. It's actually funny because I feel the presence of an almighty being in shrines and temples. I am not really Japanese but I feel that it's   sacred.)

Extract 4

EN: I am a practicing Catholic but I'd like to [say that I'm more] spiritual kasi hindi ako masyadong religious. Ako din, I always go to the temples…I practice meditation kasi. Walang dedicated [space] for the Catholic practice sa bahay ko. (I am a practicing Catholic but I'd like to [say that I'm more] spiritual than religious. I always go to the temples too…because I practice meditation. There is no dedicated [space] for Catholic practice in my house.)

Extract 5

DS: Jumping [in], you have religiosity and spirituality. It is actually so much easier to be spiritual here in Japan because you have spaces…the atmosphere is there.

SM has a prayer space in her apartment, serving as a sacred space for practicing religion even during the pandemic. However, HT, EN, and DS, who are not strictly practicing religion, agreed that Japan is conducive to nurturing one's spirituality, not necessarily religiosity. The relatively weaker presence of Catholicism or Christianity and the scarcity of its representative edifices in Japan may prompt Filipino migrants to build alternative spaces for worship. On the other hand, the ubiquity and sacred atmosphere of shrines and temples in Japan may spur migrants who do not strictly practice religion to explore their spirituality and adhere to local ways of observing ethereality. DS also pointed out that attention to the practice of religion among Filipinos in Japan should also be extended to followers of Islam.

Adapting to Japanese Culture and Language

Extract 6

HT: In general, magaling tayong mag-adapt sa environment natin. Sa Japan, super rule followers, super punctual. (In general, we are good at adapting to our environment. In Japan, we are rule followers, super punctual.)

Extract 7

DS: 空気を読める. Nakikisabay tayo. (We read the room. We keep pace with them).

HT and DS underscored the high capability of Filipinos to adapt to a new culture or environment. In relation to this, one of the topics that the informants discussed was the so-called "Filipino time," or the tendency of Filipinos to be tardy to an agreed meeting time. In Japan, where being punctual is observed and inculcated at a young age among Japanese people, "Filipino time" becomes untenable, hence prodding the informants to be timelier in their personal and professional endeavors. Aside from the refitted punctuality, the informants also cited various Japanese ways of doing that they adapted in their spaces of being in order to blend in.

Extract 8

SM: For the migrants in Japan, it's not only the culture, we also have to understand the language in order to blend in. We are more flexible.

Extract 9

EN: Based on my observation, the Japanese would expect Filipinos to adjust to the language [used here].

Extract 10

DS: Learning the language gives us power and control.

In a similar vein, Filipinos' adaptability is also evidenced by the migrants' success in developing a functional level or even mastery of the Japanese language. EN shared that the Japanese people in her circles expect Filipinos to be conversant in the Japanese language. SM, whose schooling had Japanese as the medium of instruction, agreed that in order to keep pace with colleagues, linguistic mastery is essential. She also added that Filipino migrants in Japan face the additional challenge of mastering an unfamiliar language, as opposed to those who are living in countries such as the United Kingdom or the United States of America, who have the convenience of using English, a known second or third language in the Philippines. DS argued that learning Japanese is not only a means to get by in Japanese society but also imbues the migrant with some power and control, pulling them out of the subordinate position where they are relegated by default. He also added, however, that not all migrants acquire the pen-and-paper proficiency of Japanese, yet they are able to grasp the performative aspects of communication or the use of gestures, facial expressions, and body language. Ultimately, HT, EN, and SM agreed that mastery of Japanese allows the migrant to set foot into the more intimate and privileged spaces of Japanese society, where language serves as the gatekeeper.

Extract 11

SM: Based on my experience、 almost all the Japanese I've met, what they're saying is like " 多分昔日本人だと思います、昔の人生は" (Maybe you were Japanese in your previous life)...That's how they look at me, even though I don't look like a typical Japanese but then,

like, for me the way I think, the way I express, athough I still have Filipinoness in me, they associate my way of thinking, [my] strategy when it comes to work, it's very Japanese.

The informants shared experiences of being praised for being similar to the Japanese in their spaces. Japanese people note how relatively easier it is for the Filipino migrants to adapt to the local ways, according to the informants. This can be seen in behaviors, attitudes, perspectives, and local ways of doing things. Yet, when asked whether a Filipino migrant can become "Japanese" given enough time, there were some disagreements among the informants. SM argued that it might be possible if the compliments from the Japanese were taken as the sole validation. The other informants concurred that the fabric of being Filipino will always remain, and that the closest a Filipino migrant can be would be 日本人っぽい (nihonjin ppoi) or 日本人みたい (nihonin mitai), both meaning "Japanese-like."

The Filipino Transnational Identity: Advantageous and Beneficial

Building on the idea that "Filipino migrants can never become Japanese," the informants were asked whether being bicultural—or transnational—is advantageous or disadvantageous. A consensus that living a bicultural, or even multicultural, life is more beneficial was forwarded by the informants.

Extract 12

DS: The Filipino side also gives us, I think, more room, more space to kind of act, navigate, and strategize…We can do things that a Japanese person never can, or we can enter spaces that Japanese people never can.

Extract 13

HT: Madiskarte tayo. We find ways to think outside the box…Hindi tayo ganun katakot magfail. Mas nakakapagsurvive tayo with those qualities as Filipinos in Japan. (We are resourceful. We find ways to think outside the box…We are not afraid to fail. With those qualities as Filipinos, we can survive better in Japan.)

Extract 14

SM: It's still advantageous to maintain this kind of Filipinoness within us because that basically expand[s] our horizons and perspectives in dealing with things… Same here in Japan, I've never forgotten my roots, my Chinese and Filipino roots, because I think in some cases I was able to apply, you know, those mindset[s] and perspective[s], which is, sometimes, [the] Japanese wouldn't have thought [of]… thinking out of the box.. If you have this kind of different mindset, like Chineseness or Filipinoness or whatever it may be, it is good to incorporate that because you might create something new or innovative, instead of just following one culture.

The informants agreed that possessing cultural capital from both Filipino and Japanese culture (and Chinese culture, in SM's case) affords them more resources to deal with the challenges of living in a foreign country. Moreover, it allows them to analyze and solve problems in noble ways, creatively mixing multiple cultural perspectives. Knowledge of multiple languages, for instance, puts them in a position to learn from both cultures as well as to engage in both societies. The bicultural nature of the Filipino migrant enables them to penetrate spaces that neither nonmigrating Filipinos nor Japanese people can enter and use intangible cultural resources as they deem appropriate for the situation at hand.

Extract 15

EN: Tayong mga Pilipino kasi (We, Filipinos), even in the hardest situations, we always find ways to [have] fun… I think that's what makes us adaptable to any situation at any given time. Tayo kasi kahit nahihirapan (Even if we're going through rough times), we know how to be creative. We entertain ourselves… we try to make it lighter.

Finally, the informants embraced the impression from Japanese peers that Filipino migrants are 明るい (akarui) or full of vitality. For EN, this is an essential quality of Filipinos that tides them over difficult times. For the informants, it is a Filipino character that is evaluated positively in Japanese society and multicultural settings. Hence, it is one that is advantageous to keep and equips the Filipino migrants with a positive edge in their spaces of being.

Non-Linguistic and Linguistic Dimensions of the Discourse on Transnational Identity

In the group discussion, the informants employed non-linguistic and linguistic means to co-construct the transnationalidentity through discourse. As for the non-linguistic dimension, the informants expressed agreement through nodding, smiling, and even laughing, in exchanges where they agreed with opinions heard. Disagreement, on the other hand, was not evidently expressed through gestures and facial expressions.

As for the linguistic dimension, the informants employed the following expressions to express agreement, elaboration or takeoff, and disagreement:

Agreement	Elaboration/Takeoff	Disagreement
I agree with what X said that…	Jumping in…	Sa akin naman (For me/In my experience…)
I couldn't agree more with X…	If I may add…	Based on my experience…
If I may add…	Based on my experience…	I can give another perspective…
Tama 'yung sinabi ni X na… (What X said was right that…)	Thank you for pointing that out/sharing that…	Not to discredit X but…
	Sa akin naman (For me/In my experience…)	Opinion ko lang… (My two cents…)
	あとは (ato wa)... (Moreover; Also)	

Figure 2. Linguistic Expressions Used in the Discourse on Transnational Identity

It can be observed that the expressions used were primarily English. However, some expressions were also Tagalog or code-switches between Tagalog and English. Finally, one Japanese expression was used. Although generally varying in terms of background– occupation, age, sex, and length of stay in Japan– there were numerous points of agreement in the exchange of opinions among the informants. However, the differences in backgrounds also

brought them to disagree with one another on certain occasions. The informants also built on one another's opinions when the narrative they heard resonated with them, sharing a different perspective or experience related to the topic at hand. The informants noticeably used respectful language, with no outright expressions of disagreement or strongly phrased disapproval. In describing the character and experiences of Filipino migrants en masse, they oftentimes used the Tagalog word tayo (we) which indicates inclusive narration. This inclusive narration reflected some generalizing views which the informants respectfully disagreed with at some points in the discussion, but also accepted on most occasions.

Most strikingly, the discussion was done in a flawless switching of Tagalog, English and Japanese. While the informants used mostly Tagalog in the discourse, the natural and instinctive switching between languages reflects the multilingual propensity of Filipino migrants. It is a manifestation of the bicultural, or even multicultural, reality of the Filipino migrant that is pieced together by their various experiences, needs, and aspirations as human beings living far away from their homeland. Multilingualism, therefore, is a stark manifestation of the transnational identity. Through the mundane activity of discourse, whether controlled or not, multilingualism is observed and hence, the emergent transnational identity becomes more lucid and palpable.

Discussion

The backgrounds of the informants and their motivations for moving to Japan were characterized by diversity, which also led to the variety of transnational experiences described. Highlighted was the co-construction of the transnational identity by a group of Filipino migrants with varying backgrounds, setting the current study apart from previous ones that focused on relatively homogeneous groups of Filipinos in Japan..The discourse among the respondents revealed how they negotiated their identities through the course of living in Japan, their current domicile, and how their varying backgrounds, motivations, and environments played a role in their continuing transformations. Following the identity negotiation strategies of migrants described by Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2003), the study found only one instance of ethnic flight, while no narratives showing active opposition were obtained. For the most part, the informants shared narratives exhibiting biculturalism strategies, as reflected in how they modified their practices vis-à-vis spirituality and religiosity, punctuality, and linguistic differences between the Philippines and Japan. Previously described as dual identity (Vertovec, 2004) or double belonging (Zhu, 2017), or negotiation of cultural socializations (Esteban-Guitart & Ignasi, 2015), the synchronous absorption of elements from Japanese culture and the preservation of elements from Filipino culture that result in the emergence of a transnational identity are deemed advantageous by the informants. For them, the resulting pool of cultural resources equips the Filipino migrant with diverse advantages in their spaces of being and constitutes a reason to be proud of their transnational identities.

In terms of the discourse specifics, non-linguistic and linguistic expressions were used in the co-construction of transnational identity. Non-linguistic cues included facial and body gestures, while the linguistic cues consisted of agreement, elaboration or takeoff, and disagreement phrases. In addition, essentializing became crucial in the discursive co-construction of Filipino transnational identity. This was as demonstrated by the informants' frequent use of the Tagalog inclusive pronominal tayo while discussing Filipino migrants' experiences in Japan. Essentializing played an important role in helping the informants consider their own experiences and determine whether or not their personal ideas of transnational identity could be applied generally. The spontaneous exchange of opinions reflected the unpredictability of

identity co-construction (Feller, 2014) and showed the social positioning of informants among themselves during the discourse, as well as in the social worlds they belong to beyond the current conversation.

The current study does not generalize but mainly characterizes the transnational identity from the puzzle pieces of experiences from the informants. Hence, it is expected that the transnational identity that will be co-constructed from other configurations of informants will be different. As Baxter (2016) argued, identity can be inconsistent and fragmented, and this can be observed in the varying discourses that the migrants engage themselves in. Put concisely, migrants expectedly construct and present a different identity depending on the nature of discourse, the interlocutors involved, and the space of discourse, among many other factors.

Conclusion

The usap-usap with and among the informants of the study provided an insightful look into how Filipino migrants living in Japan reflected on their transnational identity through the exchange of narratives and opinions. While numerous scholars have described the migrant using labels such as neither here nor there, in-between, and on the edge, consequently signaling some state of identity crisis or disadvantaged position, the informants viewed their current transnational lifestyle more positively than otherwise. However, the discourse among the informants did not show any intention to invalidate the reality of the less privileged migrants and those living in precarious conditions; in fact, the informants in the study also recounted stories of struggles during the early days of their migration, which, in a way, contributed to the process of eventually embracing their bicultural nature. There was also an acknowledgment that undesirable experiences are part and parcel of the migrant experience, a reality that is no different from that of the locals. Nevertheless, the creative meshing of cultural ways from the origin and destination countries endows the Filipino migrants with a competitive edge in their occupational spaces and bestows them with a deep pool of ingenious resources for dealing with the challenges of living away from their homeland—a leverage that individuals who do not have transnational experience lack.

The findings of the study contribute to the growing research on transnational identities. Understanding how transnational individuals form their self-conceptions can provide valuable insights into migration and globalization—macro-processes realized by transnational individuals and their activities. This bottom-up approach gives prominence to the nuanced experiences of transnational individuals, yielding knowledge that can complement analysis starting with the state or its institutions. Findings from studies on transnational identities also have wider social, cultural, economic, political, educational, and policy implications, among many others. For instance, data gathered from transnational identities can be used in creating programs that relate to migrant concerns, such as education, mental health, and jobs. Understanding derived from academic outputs such as the current one can also help states in formulating well-informed policies that foster smoother social and cultural integration for migrants while protecting their dignity against prejudicial forces in the society.

Beyond the current research, the usap-usap served not only as a data-gathering tool for the current research but also as an avenue for the Filipino migrants to introspect, position themselves in relation to others, and co-construct an identity that is, at times, imposed on them by scholarly descriptions. Setting a stage for migrants, especially the underrepresented and socially isolated communities, to engage in an exchange of narratives allows them to "author their own versions of their experiences" (De Fina and Tseng, 2017, p.382). The usap-usap also highlighted the migrant as a reflexive and agentive being with the capacity to realize that their

identities are constantly in flux—not a fixture, but something that they do and actively create (Butler, 1990).

Finally, the study emphasizes the importance of examining discourses that give form and shape to identities. In the current research, the activity of discoursing served as an avenue for the migrants to contemplate their histories and trajectories, evaluate their realities in relation to themselves and the others, and name their experiences, which would otherwise be unarticulated. The discourse became the birthing ground for the transnational identity that the informants co-constructed from their active exchange of narratives and thoughts and through agreements, disagreements, and negotiations. Discourse, as it unfolds, does not only reflect the transnational identity but also actively constructs it and makes it lucid, palpable, and more concrete.

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