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# #OFW: Filipino migrant workers brokering counter narratives of overseas life on TikTok

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### Abstract

Over the past decades, government institutions and migration agencies have brokered the good life overseas among Filipinos through recruitment mechanisms. Additionally, they administer training and seminars to construct the ideal Filipino migrant who is culturally fit and deserving to benefit from partaking in a global market and society. In this paper, I critically explore the ways that Filipino migrants create and produce TikTok videos to broker counter narratives to the glossy portraiture of living and working overseas by formal migration channels. I deploy the digital brokering lens to capture and analyse the diverse digital mechanisms that Filipino migrants deploy to produce and circulate subversive contents designed to engage with a networked transnational public. The findings show that Filipino migrants expose hardships in the workplace, reveal self-responsibilisation of managing struggles, visibilise precarious resources, and call out abuse by capitalising on relatable contents, credibility building, and platform-specific and discursive styles. Ultimately, by applying a thematic and critical discourse analysis to examine 100 TikTok videos linked to the hashtag #OFW (Overseas Filipino Worker), this study sheds light on the subversive possibilities of digital brokerage among Filipino migrant workers that expose the hidden dangers and pitfalls of a life abroad operationalised in a neoliberal global economy.

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### Introduction

Over the past years, the Philippine government and multiple migration agencies have promoted and brokered the good life overseas among Filipinos. This has been an integral strategy in a neoliberal

Philippine economy that relies on the exportation of human labor to address intersecting economic and political crises. By sending surplus labor overseas, the Philippine economy benefits from the flows of remittances, consumer goods, and philanthropic ventures. Notably, in a market-oriented migration infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014), formal channels frame the accessibility of a stable and sustainable overseas life among Filipino migrants through the exemplary customer service experienced by a clientele abroad (Rodriguez, 2010). In this case, they deploy a range of mechanisms — trainings, seminars, and promotional materials — to construct an ideal Filipino migrant (Guevarra, 2010) — self-sacrificing, submissive, resilient, and even entrepreneurial. In an increasingly digital era, the brokering of the good life made accessible to an ideal Filipino migrant manifests in a range of government Web sites (Guevarra, 2010) and social media channels (Ayaydin, 2020). These offline and online mechanisms reinforce the obedient and skilful Filipino migrant deserving a rewarding life elsewhere. But what if the Filipino migrant begins to challenge the glossy portrait of a life abroad as told and sold by government and migration institutions in a neoliberal economy?

In this paper, I critically explore the ways that Filipino migrant workers create and produce TikTok videos to broker counter narratives to the sparkly depiction of living and working overseas by formal migration channels. Deploying a thematic and critical discourse analysis (van Leeuwen, 1995r), this paper draws insights from analysing 100 TikTok videos linked to the hashtag #OFW (Overseas Filipino Worker). The videos were watched, transcribed, and examined from May to August 2023. The hashtag #OFW was selected to capture the prominence of the migrant figure in a labor exporting country like the Philippines. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (2022), there were 1.83 million Overseas Filipino Workers, also labelled as modern-day heroes (*mga bagong bayani*) in recognition of their immense contribution to the Philippine economy. The Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (2023) reports that cash remittances of OFWs reached to US\$12.98 billion in May 2023. Notably, the term Overseas Filipino Worker (formerly Overseas Contract Worker) is used by the Philippine state to brand the heroic acts of Filipinos in migrating overseas to support themselves, their families, and the nation-state (Aguilar, 2014). However, it is a figure that has also been critically interrogated as a symptomatic of the lack of social welfare support, public services, and job opportunities to ordinary Filipinos (San Juan, 2009). Such entrenched disadvantage is deeply linked to the neoliberal Philippine economy characterised by increased privatisation, liberalisation, and deregulation. As a result, ordinary Filipinos take risks overseas to support themselves and their family members and relatives. Moreover, OFW is a brand ascribed with racialized and gendered ideologies that construct and broker the ideal Filipino migrant worker (Guevarra, 2010; Rodriguez, 2010). These considerations influenced the rationale behind searching videos related to #OFW.

Against the backdrop of Philippine migration is the widespread uptake of digital technologies among Filipino migrants. Many studies have already established the crucial role of modern communication technologies and online channels for forging and sustaining personal and familial relationships among Filipino migrants and their distant networks (Cabalquinto, 2022; Francisco-Menchavez, 2018; Madianou and Miller, 2011). However, Filipino migrants have also used digital technologies and social media to connect to a networked public (boyd, 2010) in a transnational domain. For instance, they use blogs (Cabalquinto, 2013) and discussion forums (Ignacio, 2005) to share curated contents overseas and deliberate with topics back home. Currently, TikTok, a short-video based platform owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, has been utilised by Filipino migrants to engage with a networked public (C. de Guzman, 2020), highlighting the effects of TikTok on personal, familial, and social lives (Abidin, 2020).

However, broadly speaking, TikTok has also become a crucial site for resistance (Chee, 2023; Hurley, 2023a; Jaramillo-Dent, Contreras-Pulido, and Pérez-Rodríguez, 2022; Kaur-Gill, 2023). A growing body of work has underlined how migrants appropriate the technological features of TikTok, such as hashtags, filters, audio memes, and comedic contents, for social commentary and criticism of oppressive systems (Chee, 2023; Jaramillo-Dent, *et al.*, 2024). This paper builds on these studies, particularly noting how migrants appropriate the platform vernaculars to produce creative counter narratives (Jaramillo-Dent, Alencar, and Asadchy, 2022; Jaramillo-Dent, *et al.*, 2024). As such, the paper is focussed on how Filipino migrant workers produce TikTok videos that counter the good life abroad often manufactured to them by formal channels. On TikTok they reveal the effects of a neoliberal economy that mediates their life abroad,

and their contents speak to an imagined networked transnational public. The audience, as argued by scholars, is crucial in shaping the relational labor enacted by the content creators (Baym, 2015). In this case, I deploy the digital brokering lens (Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022) that underscores the ways that content creators utilise diverse mechanisms — relatability, credibility building, discursive styles, and platform-specific strategies — to navigate the precarity enabled by a neoliberal Philippine economy. Additionally, this lens engages with the audiences that are perceived to be navigating the perils of a neoliberal economy. Additionally, this paper applies the digital brokering lens in examining the implications of TikTok use among Filipino migrants, an approach which remains understudied. In investigating the ways in which Filipino migrants use TikTok for brokering counter narratives on overseas life, this study addresses the following questions: How do Filipino migrants portray their life overseas on TikTok? What digital mechanisms do they deploy to broker subversive narratives to an imagined networked transnational public? What do their digital practices reveal about the subversive potentials of digital brokerage in a neoliberal migration landscape? The findings show the subversive practices of migrant Filipino workers on TikTok, including exposing hardships in the workplace, self-responsibility in managing struggles, picturing precarious resources, and calling out abuse.

This paper is divided into different sections. First, I describe the operation of migration brokerage in the Philippines. Second, I chart relevant studies to articulate the implications of TikTok in shaping the lived experiences of migrants. I also discuss the digital brokering lens and its significance in unpacking the subversive potentials of digital media use among migrants. Third, I present the methods used in collecting and analysing the data. This is followed by a presentation of the data, particularly highlighting the counter narratives of migrant Filipino workers. Lastly, I present a discussion of findings and a conclusion.

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## **The brokerage of a life abroad in a neoliberal state**

Formal brokers shape the mobility and settlement of aspiring and current migrants (Faist, 2014; Lindquist, 2018; Shrestha and Yeoh, 2018). Building on their tacit knowledge and years of expertise, they often provide migrants with crucial information on migrating and settling in a foreign country (Shrestha and Yeoh, 2018) as well as access to employment opportunities (Kern and Müller-Böker, 2015). In migration research, they have been referred to as social actors embedded within a migration infrastructure consisted of commercial, regulatory, humanitarian, social, and technological dimensions, shaping both the mobility and immobility of migrants (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014).

As a labor exporting country, the Philippines presents a strong case for migration brokerage. Historically, it was in 1974 when former President Ferdinand Marcos issued Presidential Decree 422, designed to promote overseas migration as a temporary solution to escalating poverty, underemployment, and unemployment in the Philippines (Aguilar, 2014). Additionally, it was the Labor Code of 1974 that formalised a Philippine labour migration program underlining the benefits of overseas migration. It was also during this period when government agencies such as the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration were established to manage the mobility and deployment of overseas Filipino workers. Importantly, governments, public and private migration offices, and migration agents broker the ‘good life’ to ordinary Filipinos, positioning overseas employment as worth taking because of the perceived benefits for oneself, family members, and the nation.

However, in a market-driven migration economy (Baas, 2019), the provision of a good life for migrant workers tend to privilege clients and expose migrants to precarious conditions. In this case, this outcome is a result of how brokers construct a migrant that is desirable, valuable, and docile (Deshingkar, 2019; Guevarra, 2010; Rodriguez, 2010; Shrestha and Yeoh, 2018). In the Philippines, migration actors run a range of seminars and training to ensure the production of an ideal Filipino workers, such as through pre-departure orientation seminars (PDOS) (Guevarra, 2010; Polanco, 2017). In such a seminar, migrating Filipinos are taught to be compliant and submissive to avoid conflict and be deported (Polanco, 2017;

Tungohan, 2021). It is also in these seminars where gendered and racialized ideologies are reinforced, such as men being obligated to remit money and women are expected to enact both caring and economic role in a transnational household (Tungohan, 2021). Guevarra (2010) argued that the Philippines has set a standard when it comes to managing its surplus population through brokerage as a form of ‘image making’ of an ideal migrant. She used the concept of ‘ethos of labour migration’ to unpack how the mechanisms — training, seminars, and promotional materials — deployed by social actors contribute to the formation of a marketable and ideal migrant. In a mediated era, a range of online channels such as Web sites (Guevarra, 2014), social media (Polanco, 2017) and even mobile applications (Cabalquinto and Wood-Bradley, 2020) are utilised by businesses, government services, and migration agencies to portray and sell the ideal migrant Filipino worker. However, these mechanisms only push migrants to precarious, sub-optimal working conditions, and compound inequalities (Deshingkar, 2019).

As we usher in an expanding migration industry, scholars have observed the emergence of informal brokers or individuals who have an inside knowledge on navigating the bureaucracy of migration (Lindquist, 2012), because of the low level of trust among official brokers who tend to perpetuate precarious conditions and subjectivity of migrants (Deshingkar, 2019). In an increasingly digital era, migrants themselves become curators and storytellers of their everyday lives and overseas journeys (Georgiou and Leurs, 2022), brokering crucial information on migration routes and settlement opportunities and constraints in digital spaces (Dekker and Engbersen, 2014). They use social media to share their experiences abroad and insider knowledge to individuals aspiring to move into their host country. Given the fundamental role of migrants as informal brokers in digital spaces, it is not surprising to see the emergence of “diaspora micro-influencers” (Zhang and Zhao, 2020), ‘immigrant influencers’ (Jaramillo-Dent, *et al.*, 2022), or ‘student guides or study-abroad influencers’ (Jayadeva, 2020; Jayadeva and Thieme, 2022) who heavily use digital technologies and online channels to document their lives abroad, spread awareness on life abroad, curate migration pathways, and eventually attract a huge following and monetise their contents (Jayadeva, 2024; Jayadeva and Thieme, 2022).

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## The subversive potential of TikTok in a migration landscape

TikTok has penetrated everyday lives. TikTok enables users to produce creative and engaging contents by exploiting the platform’s multiple features and styles, such as hashtags, filters, memetic audio, lip-synchs, livestreaming, and duets (Abidin, 2020; Abidin and Kaye, 2021; Zulli and Zulli, 2022). Importantly, it has allowed individuals users to produce videos for calling out abuse or criticising oppressive systems and social injustices (Abidin, 2020).

In a migration context, TikTok has been appropriated by migrants to produce subversive contents and agentic identities. The technical features of TikTok have been utilised for asserting agency and challenging discriminatory structures of everyday life. For instance, Jaramillo-Dent, *et al.* (2024) coined the term ‘platformed belonging’ to articulate how Latin migrant creators capitalise on platform vernaculars and affordances for asserting multiple types of agencies and fostering belongingness. Latin migrants share contents on ‘being a good migrant’, navigating a life abroad, and articulating mobility rights.

Complementing such findings is the work by Hurley (2023b), showing how migrant, domestic, and service workers in Dubai produce TikTok videos to help others in navigating marginality, such finding low-cost studios and rooms as well as finding resilience through participation in collective events among diverse nationalities. Meanwhile, other studies have foregrounded the ways that Filipino migrants reclaim their agency on TikTok. For example, Darvin (2022) uncovered the ways that Filipino migrants in Hong Kong deployed translingual practices, such as the use of Bisaya, Filipino, and English, to curate a transnational Filipino identity and forge and maintain social networks in and outside of the host country. Meanwhile, in Chee (2023), migrant domestic workers produced singing, dance, and funny videos “... to craft new subjectivities and new selves capable of thinking and doing otherwise.” [1]. During the pandemic, migrants produced TikTok videos that centred their everyday precarious living conditions in their host country to

assert their agency and foster camaraderie in digital spaces (Kaur-Gill, 2023). Indeed, migrants appropriate the affordances of TikTok for political and social commentaries, demonstrating how minorities use a range of social media outlets for critiquing exclusionary and abusive systems (Abidin, 2021; Abidin and Brown, 2018).

Building on this rich terrain of scholarship on TikTok and migration research, I examine the TikTok videos produced by Filipino migrants through a digital brokering lens (Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022). Examining the practices of Filipinos in using YouTube through a diverse range of qualitative methods such as content analysis and interviews, a digital brokering perspective highlights how content creators use online platforms to navigate marginality produced by a neoliberal economy. For them, the content creators deploy digital mechanisms, such as relatable content, credibility building, discursive styles, and platform-specific strategies, to attract viewers, harness followers, and monetise content. For instance, Filipino content creators broker the way that the use of skin-lightening products or their interracial partnership a capital for social mobility and economic progress. Additionally, some content creators broker their online and gig work to cope with precarious tasks in the Philippines. In a migration landscape, brokerage operates when migrants broker their overseas experiences to current or aspiring migrants. Migrants share advice or tips on how to migrate and navigate overseas life on social media (Dekker and Engbersen, 2014), such as TikTok (Jaramillo-Dent, *et al.*, 2024). However, it is important to note that digital brokering can also expose the hidden risks and harms of migration in a neoliberal terrain by disclosing personalised and relatable experiences of precarity that converse with an imagined transnational networked public through relational labor of connection (Baym, 2015). In a sense the transnational networked public include a range of social actors, such as family members, aspiring migrants, and even officials, who engage with migration related content. Ultimately, as will be shown in this paper, Filipino migrants use digital mechanisms on TikTok to broker counter narratives on the positive and picture-perfect life abroad, packaged and sold by formal brokers to aspiring migrants.

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## Researching Filipino migrants' TikTok use

This paper is part of a broader project that seeks to examine the ways that diverse social actors in the migration industry use modern communication technologies and online channels for brokering migration pathway and settlement. It particularly critically examines how Filipino migrant workers create and produce TikTok videos to broker counter narratives to the glossy portraiture of living and working overseas by formal migration channels. In 2020, during the pandemic, I created a personal TikTok account. However, as I used TikTok, I noticed the proliferation of content produced by migrant Filipino workers sharing their experiences of living abroad in the 'for you page' (FYP). The content creators often perform blue-collar jobs, such as domestic work and service crew. Notably, in the Philippines, TikTok had already penetrated the everyday digital lives of Filipinos. According to DataReportal, there were 84.45 million social media users in the Philippines as of January 2023 (Kemp, 2023). The Philippines had 43.43 million TikTok users aged 18 and above in January 2023 (Kemp, 2023).

I zoomed into the videos produced by Filipino migrant workers. Understanding that my personal account would be contaminated by videos produced by Filipino migrant workers and other irrelevant videos, I created a new TikTok account in May 2023. This account was only used for accessing videos connected to the hashtag #OFW. As a restart, I put #OFW onto the search bar on TikTok and identified and collated videos appearing with #OFW. I used a spreadsheet for the links of videos, with categories including video link, total running time, social actor, video, text on video, audio, and caption. From June to August 2023, I watched, transcribed, and analysed 100 videos linked to #OFW. In selecting the videos, I did not include content produced by governmental and private agencies, as well as the comments on each video. This decision was informed by a focus on examining the narratives and representations made by Filipino migrants on TikTok. In addition to transcribing the audio (voice overs and talk to cam) and the lyrics of music, I jotted down superimposed graphics, hashtags, and emojis incorporated in the videos. Initially, I

deployed a simple thematic analysis (Flick, 2011) of content (text, visuals, music, and hashtag), paying close attention to smaller codes that can be grouped and categorised to formulate larger themes (see sample below). In organising the smaller themes, I arrived at four main themes, such as hardship, motivational, call out, and succeed.

<b>Table 1: Table of codes.</b>			
<b>Hardship (48 videos)</b>	<b>Motivational (Navigate struggles) (25 videos)</b>	<b>Call out (24 videos)</b>	<b>Succeed (9 videos)</b>
Can't go home (3) Not allowed to complain (1) Fight alone (4) No choice but to leave (1) Sadness of being away/homesick (6) Tiredness (1) Sleepless (11) Hunger (1) Depression (1) Forced to work for the family (1) Wanting to be selfish (1) Callous hands (1) Victim of abuse (3) Blame self when fail (1) Low salary (1) Hard labour (1) Questioning if being an OFW is forever (1) Bad employer (1) Selfish employer (1) Stingy employer (1) Jealous employer (1) Rude employer (1)	Swallow pride (1) Stay positive (1) Avoid posting bad experiences (1) God is there (2) Persevere (1) Go back when successful (1) For the future of loved ones (1) Prioritise	Call to understand migrants when smiling (1) Accused of being boastful when not give money after going abroad (1) Encourage to keep going as an OFW (5) Ask family to save money sent (1) Assume good life abroad (1) Bad employer (1) Selfish employer (1)	

Pre-departure packing bag (1)	family needs (1)	Stingy employer (1)	Success work (1)
Pre-departure airport (1)	Needs (1)	Jealous employer (1)	Surprise visit after years of being away from family (25)
Leaving airport (2)	patience (1)	Rude employer (1)	A day in a life (6)
Hiding sadness of leaving (3)	Dancing and having fun (2)	Assume rich/lots of money (3)	Coming home — vacation (2)
Don't spend to send money (1)	Work hard (1)	Family member eats better (1)	Waiting/Picking up for an OFW (2)
Expressing sad to leave (1)	Make the most of life while you can (1)	Going home with no souvenirs and being treat bad (1)	Benefits of working abroad (6)
Hard to work overseas (1)	Hanging out with friends (1)	Hard to work overseas (1)	With good employer — children (1)
Missing the Philippines (1)	Motivate to take care of yourself (1)	Encourage family members to spend wisely (10)	Shop for clothes and other items (1)
Alone when sick (1)	With good employer — children (1)	Hard to earn money (1)	Investment house (1)
Hard to earn money (1)	Benefits of working abroad (6)	Others borrow money (1)	Investment business (1)
Others borrow money (1)	Sending chocolates (1)	Alone looking for opportunities (1)	Not everyone is lucky with their employer — motivation (1)
Alone looking for opportunities (1)	Asking for shoe size (1)		
Packing a <i>balikbayan</i> box (1)	Salary reveal (1)		
Being an OFW life is full of problems and sacrifices (1)	Investment house (1)		
Having initiative to work but being asked to work more (1)	Investment business (1)		
Working in the house of an employer (1)	Motivational to be a smart OFW (1)		
Stress to go back to the Philippines with no money (1)	Think of your family as motivation to overcome life challenges (1)		
Sadness overseas despite Christmas (1)	Need to be tough (1)		
Difficulty at work (5)	Remind to seek help when abused (1)		
		Being accused of selfish for not lending money (1)	
		Being ignored by family members when money is sent (1)	
		Ignore family who rely (1)	
		Can't buy for themselves and prioritise family (1)	

Sending remittances (2) Pain of taking care of other children and not your own (1) Woman being demonised for being away (1) Not eating on time (1) Stole food and use iron to cook (1) Some go home dead (1) Only have receipts — Debts (2)		Being asked to send items (1) Value of sending items (1)	
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I applied digital brokering lens (Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022) to determine the ways in which Filipino migrants appropriated digital mechanisms, such as relatable content, credibility-building, discursive styles, and platform-specific strategies, for brokering counter narratives on life abroad as packaged and sold by formal outlets to aspiring and ideal migrants. To expose the subversive practices of Filipino migrants through digital brokering, I deployed a critical discourse analysis (van Leeuwen, 1995). Here, I identified and examined the ways that text, visuals, and audio represented exclusion and inclusion across TikTok videos. I also considered socio-cultural variables and relational identifications of the videos (van Leeuwen, 1995). By identifying these elements, the analysis foregrounds the politics of an overseas life and how they were communicated to readers (van Leeuwen, 1995). In the process, I observed that the Filipino migrants used the terms “This is our life ...”, “We&#x201c;, or “Most OFWs” to craft their relatable content and harness credibility building. They also used discursive styles on TikTok, such as hashtag (such as #hugot or to pull), filters, and audio templates, to further amplify their subversive narratives. I also noticed that Filipino migrants addressed an imagined transnational networked public, by using terms such as “employers overseas”, “To everyone who has family members abroad”, or “... travelling OFW”. Ironically, not a single video from the 100 videos collected directly addressed the Philippine government in demanding accountability for the hardships of overseas Filipinos. There could be fear of government surveillance and control (Kaur-Gill, 2023). Nonetheless, addressing individuals and certain groups became a platform-specific strategy for engaging audiences in reflecting on the contradictions of the packaged ‘good life’ abroad. By using a critical discourse analysis, this study unraveled the counter narratives of Filipino migrants on TikTok by exposing the hidden pitfalls of an overseas life operationalised in a neoliberal global economy.

The videos were accessed in a publicly accessible platform. Following the ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (2019), to protect the privacy of content creators, I omitted their names and I transcribed text into English with some alterations to anonymize references in videos (Markham, 2012). Included in this paper are selected quotes and descriptive notes.



## The life abroad of a Filipino on TikTok

Filipino migrant workers used TikTok to showcase their migration journeys and experiences, ranging from leaving the Philippines, working abroad, and eventually going back home. The videos collected highlighted a day in a life of a Filipino migrant worker, such as from showing snippets of preparing for work, working, and going to a remittance centre to send money back to the Philippines. The visuals were combined with a set of hashtags, emojis, stickers, and graphics as well as popular music and voice overs. As Jaramillo-Dent, *et al.* (2022) contended, the features of TikTok were appropriated by migrants to create visibility, engagement, and a sense of belonging. In this paper, deploying a digital brokering lens, I unpack how Filipino migrant workers used digital mechanisms, such as relatability, credibility building, discursive styles, and platform-specific strategies, to broker subversive narratives on overseas life on TikTok. These contents inform and even call out an imagined transnational networked public.

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## Exposing hardships in the workplace

I observed that a majority of the videos illustrated the hardships of Filipino migrant workers. Here the OFW was typically filmed working as a service crew in a restaurant or as a domestic helper in a home. Notably, the videos were linked to hashtags of countries across the world where the Philippines deployed many migrant workers. For instance, several videos used #ofwsaudi Arabia, #ofwmiddleeast, #ofwqatarQA, and #ofwriyadh. This information ties in to reports showing a growing number of overseas Filipinos in Middle Eastern countries. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (2022), of the total 1.83 million OFWs in 2021, about 24.4 percent worked in Saudi Arabia followed by United Arab Emirates at 14.4 percent. Other countries in Asia with large number of OFWs include Hongkong (6.7 percent), Kuwait (5.9 percent), Singapore (5.8 percent), and Qatar (4.8 percent).

The videos revealed the gendered disparities of overseas employment (Parreñas, 2020). Most videos depicted Filipino women wearing a uniform and working in the home of an employer. Meanwhile, most videos portrayed men either working as a service crew in a restaurant or in construction. This is not surprising. Such gendered division of employment overseas complements data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (2022). In 2021, there were 1.10 million Filipina OFWs and there were 726,000 Filipino OFWs. Studies revealed that the majority of Filipina migrants work in the care industry and sales, while Filipino migrants are typically employed as electrical and electronic assemblers, in ships and related trades (de Guzman, 2003). Nonetheless, Filipino migrant workers exposed their hardships in the workplace on TikTok.

For instance, a video depicted a Filipina migrant worker, wearing a white uniform, discussing her hardship, working in the house of her employer. In the video, she is seen setting up a cooking pan and an iron. She then uses the iron as a source of heat for cooking. She puts the cooking oil on the pan and starts cooking eggs. She eventually cooks two pieces of a hotdog. Then she pulls out a bowl with the left-over food of her employer. Wiping her tears, she eats the cooked eggs and hotdogs. As she starts to eat, she noted:

This is our life as DH (domestic helper) abroad. We couldn't eat on time. My employer denies me of food, so I sneak in a food to cook while they sleep. If I am not strategic, I'd probably be repatriated as a dead body to the Philippines. I eat once a day but it's fine because I need to endure it because my family back home will suffer if I don't endure the challenges overseas.

By closely examining the narrative, the Filipina migrant established her credibility by talking about her employment status, as a domestic helper. She then disclosed her self-sacrifices, which operate as a relatable

narrative for other migrants in similar conditions. She also amplified her narrative by adding discursive styles such as the graphics “Life of an OFW” as well as overwhelmed and weeping emojis to express her emotions. Notably, as a platform-specific strategy, she addressed a transnational networked public. She remarked:

To everyone who has family members abroad, use wisely every penny given to you. It’s very difficult to endure the challenges here for one’s family. This is not for the weakling, but we try to endure everything for our children and our family back in the Philippines. If you eat three times a day back home, we’re denied of food in here. So hopefully you realise that it’s not easy to live a life of an OFW especially when being away from loved ones.

In this statement, the Filipina migrant worker reminded her viewers of who she is as a migrant (Chee, 2023). But she also reiterated the painful and inhuman experiences that she has to go through (Constable, 2007), which she utilises to remind those families with an overseas family member to be spend money wisely. Moreover, it could be argued that the Filipina migrant worker also unravels the extreme hardship of living and working abroad that is often missing in the narratives of promoting the ‘self-sacrificing’ migrant that governments and agencies laud as part of accessing a good life abroad (Guevarra, 2010).

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### **Picturing precarious resources**

Some of the videos contained narratives highlighting the success of a migrant Filipino worker. This is not a surprising given the ways that Filipino migrants curate their successes on social media (Lorenzana, 2016), such as documenting their travels in tourist attractions (Aguirre and Davies, 2015) or participating in beauty pageants (Roces, 2022). Through such depictions, a Filipino migrant worker elevates their status (McKay, 2012) and reassures distant kins of their good welfare and potential bright future (McKay, 2012). However, some videos also disclose the precarious resources that Filipino migrant workers often must manage before reaching success.

For instance, a video showcased a montage of photos curating the successful journey of a Filipino migrant worker. The video began with a photo of a Filipino migrant worker in the workplace, establishing credibility. To achieve relatability, the video presented a series of photos showing the Filipino migrant worker posing in several tourist locations. The video then segued to a compilation of photos of a house being constructed and eventually completed in the Philippines. It also illustrated the migrant posing with a car, followed by a photo showing his parents posing beside the auto. The video ended with a photo of the migrant posing with multiple boxes as part of his business. In addition to the video, memetic audio (Abidin and Kaye, 2021), “The good part” by AJR, played in the background. This song, particularly the lyrics “Can we skip to the good part”, has been used by Filipino migrant workers on TikTok to reveal ‘success’ or ‘something good’ in their lives. The following text was superimposed in the video:

Enduring 5 years as OFW. Send money to fix our house. The house that won’t let the noise outside get in and disturb you and it won’t be infiltrated by mosquitoes. The toilet not using a tarpaulin for a makeshift door. Bought a car to avoid getting wet when going somewhere. Until I eventually learned to start my business for a hopeful future for myself and my family. And now I keep going for a bright future. I thank you God.

The video primarily curated the success of a migrant Filipino worker, and also provided a performance of an altruistic and entrepreneurial migrant (Guevarra, 2010). It also demonstrated filial piety by a migrant, not forgetting his family by providing a home and a car (Aguilar, 2009). However, it also spoke to a transnational networked public about how success was shaped by having precarious resources. Here, a Filipino migrant worker must endure for ‘many years’ before attaining a certain level of success, which formal brokers fail to mention when promoting a good and stable life for ideal migrants (Guevarra, 2010).

The portraiture of a triumphant migrant was also demonstrated in how Filipino migrant workers surprised their family members back home through home visits. A visit, as argued by Baldassar (2015), served as a way to reconnect with people, places, and events, and therefore cement relationships (Baldassar, 2015). Importantly, a visit signals the completion of a migrant’s journey, by being reunited with family members and peers and fulfilling familial obligations (Baldassar, 2001).

Some videos portrayed a Filipino migrant worker performing a prank on family members, accompanied by the popular Filipino music “MAPA” by SB19. The emotive lyrics suggest the unconditional love for a mother: “*Kaya ’wag mag-alala, ipikot ang ’yon mata. Tahan na, pahinga muna, ako na’ang bahala. Labis pa sa labis ang ’yong nagawa. Mama, pahinga muna, ako na.*” (“So don’t worry, close your eyes. Stop crying, have a rest, I’ll take care of it. What you’ve done is more than enough. Mom, have a rest first, leave it to me.”) In the video, a Filipino migrant worker acted as a waiter. He served food to the parents, while another sibling filmed the act. The parents did not recognise their son because of a mask, and they kept on talking. Their son eventually revealed himself to the parents by removing the mask. The mother was surprised, crying in joy. The video included text, “My nurse brother went home from working in Ireland after three years and acted as a waiter to surprise our Mom and Dad!” In this video, the transnational networked public might not immediately identify the main actor as a Filipino migrant worker. However, through the unfolding of the prank, with additional captions and images, it then recognises the actor as a Filipino migrant who was finally home and reunited with his family. Notably, the transnational networked public also becomes aware that a migrant’s home visit is a form of achievement. Some Filipino migrant workers have resources and can visit the Philippines, for a short or long periods of time. However, for most Filipino migrant workers, an actual visit is put on hold or even impossible because of a lack of resources to visit the Philippines either for vacation or permanent settlement (Parreñas, 2005). The uncertainty of going back to the Philippines is often not covered by formal channels in their promotion of overseas mobility and settlement.

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## Self-responsibility in managing struggles

I noticed that several videos served as motivational content for Filipino migrant workers. Echoing several studies (Hurley, 2023b; Jaramillo-Dent, *et al.*, 2024), Filipino migrant workers shared their tacit knowledge on how to handle the struggles of living overseas. For example, a video depicted a large plane landing on a runway. As the plane landed, a male voice mimicked the sound of an in-flight announcement. The voice remarked:

Ladies and gentlemen. A reminder to all our traveling OFW. Prioritise savings instead of buying an iPhone. Invest in a business and not luxury. The salary must not be splurged on a bag and shoes. Avoid giving too much, prioritise your house. Learn to be strategic and avoid being choosy. Reach your dreams. Avoid pretentions. And most of all, save for your future so you can grow. This flight is bound to the Philippines and thank you for choosing us. Happy travels, my countrymen!

Zooming into the video, credibility was achieved by having the voice mimic that of a flight attendant.

Apart from the hashtag #OFW, the video appeared with the hashtag #hugotlines, capitalising on a relatable content by showing a visual of a plane and ‘*hugot*’. In Philippine culture, *hugot* is an affective state among Filipinos in online and offline worlds. Lorenzana (2018) argued “... an emotive practice that emerges from mundane appropriations of the hashtag among young Filipinos.” [2] Lorenzana (2018) explained that *hugot* or making emotive statements in online spaces allowed Filipinos to generate feelings of relatability, intimacy, belonging, and community. In the video, the narrative engaged the transnational networked public through a *hugot*. It becomes a powerful affective dimension to motivate Filipino migrant workers in managing overseas life.

Similarly, another video offered a motivational advice. It began with a visual of a plane about to take off. As the plane moved, a man spoke: “Don’t go abroad if you’re a weakling. Don’t go abroad if you surrender easily. Overseas, if you feel any hardship or if you feel you can’t handle it anymore, you don’t have a choice but to keep going with your contract. You can’t say no or I can’t do it. Overseas, you must have a strong will. Overseas, you must always be prepared. Overseas, you deal with your problems on your own.” Similarly, the video used the hashtag #hugot, showing the emotions of Filipino migrant workers. Indeed, these videos demonstrated how migrants used TikTok videos as a space for peer support and solidarity (Hurley, 2023a; Jaramillo-Dent, *et al.*, 2022; Kaur-Gill, 2023). However, they also spoke to a transnational networked public about self-responsibility in managing emotions, affective states, and precarious conditions. Indeed, their narratives revealed a dependence on oneself in a terrain where institutional support was lacking or missing (Constable, 2007).

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## Calling out abuse

Scholars have observed that migrants used comedic videos to make social commentaries on the exploitation of migrants (Chee, 2023; Jaramillo-Dent, *et al.*, 2024; Kaur-Gill, 2023). In this study, I noticed that Filipino migrant workers particularly addressed family and community members, who represent members of a transnational networked public. They used a confessional talk format (Raun, 2018), framed as “real talk”.

A case in point was a video showing a Filipina migrant worker relating to a story of a Filipino migrant worker who has been approached by a contact to borrow money. This finding complements my work showing how online channels have been used by non-migrant Filipinos to borrow money from overseas Filipinos (Cabalquinto, 2024). In the video, the Filipina migrant worker shared her story, a move to establish credibility and relatability. With the video containing a superimposed graphics of ‘OFW sentiments’, operating as a discursive style in the video, she remarked:

There is one video in here, created by an OFW. The person said, during the time when I was dreaming to go abroad, I was applying for a visa to go overseas, I was fixing documents that I need, and I borrowed money for a placement fee, I did everything on my own. When I am here abroad, I am exhausted, crying, homesick, alone. Then suddenly a person will chat with you, borrowing money, without knowing that you’re paying for a debt that you used to move abroad. When you said that you can’t lend money because you’re paying a debt, the person will say that you’re selfish or you’re boastful already because you’re based overseas.

The video exemplifies the call out culture on TikTok (Abidin, 2020). It shows how a Filipino migrant calls out those individuals who identify migrants as ‘selfish’ or ‘boastful’ when they cannot lend money. Indeed, those in a similar situation can relate to this incident. Importantly, the video also revealed that the person

asking for money was employing a guilt trip (Baldassar, 2015), reminding the migrant of their status and capacity to potentially lend money. However, the migrant did not tolerate this behaviour. As the Filipina migrant worker noted:

But the big question is where this person during the time was when I was struggling to fix my documents to go abroad. Where is this person when I was stressed looking for money for a placement fee? Where was this person when I was based abroad, struggling, homesick? We're not selfish but we also have priorities. I hope you understand.

Using a filter is one of the key features of TikTok (Abidin, 2020). In a video, the 'crying filter' was appropriated by a Filipino migrant worker to express emotions and call out those who assume migrant workers are rich. The Filipino migrant worker observed:

Not because you're based overseas then you're rich. That you have lots of money, you have lots of savings, and you're eating delicious food. You know what's real? Sometimes the food of those who receive our money is better than us. Some just eat eggs to send money. Some opt not to buy things for themselves so they can send money to their relatives. And when you go home without souvenirs, your relatives will feel bad. It's as if it's your obligation to bring souvenirs for them. It's not like that. It's difficult to work overseas.

In this statement, the Filipino migrant called out those individuals demonising Filipino migrant workers when they were not giving away souvenirs when they returned home. It also exposed the hardships of a Filipino migrant worker, and therefore justified feelings of frustration, operating as a reality check for non-migrant Filipinos. Similar to the first video, calling out practices remind the transnational networked public of the abuse and frustrations from peers and family members that Filipino migrant workers often experience.


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## **Conclusion: Brokering the 'ugly' overseas life**

Governments, migration agencies, and associated migration infrastructures have triumphed in promoting, brokering, and selling a promise of a good life overseas among Filipinos migrants. Evidence of the success of these programs appears in the numbers of ordinary Filipinos leaving their country to access opportunities elsewhere and support themselves and their loved ones. Importantly, such outward mobility has also been propelled by a neoliberal Philippine economy, given the absence of social welfare support systems, sustainable jobs, and accessible public services due to heightened privatisation, deregulation, and liberalisation. Ordinary Filipinos are left with no choice but to take risks for a promised good life overseas, demanding the embodiment of an ideal migrant worker — self-sacrificing, docile, resilient, and entrepreneurial (Guevarra, 2010).

In this paper, I described how Filipino migrant workers produce and create TikTok videos to broker counter narratives to the glossy portraiture of living and working overseas by formal migration channels. By applying a digital brokering lens, this study has shown how Filipino migrants navigate a neoliberal economy by capitalising on relatable content, credibility building, and platform-specific and discursive styles to expose hardships in the workplace, reveal self-responsibility in managing struggles, picture precarious resources, and call out abuse. In the process, TikTok videos have exposed the hidden dangers of

‘a life overseas’ especially in a neoliberal global economy. With a lack of institutional support from the host and home country, Filipino migrants are subjected to exploitation and precarity. They also tend to internalise self-responsibility for managing struggles overseas. Importantly, with a lack of support by the state to non-Filipino migrants, Filipino migrant workers are heavily relied upon to access resources and support. These outcomes are articulated through digital mechanisms that inform and even reprimand a transnational networked public. Indeed, Filipino migrant workers have utilised TikTok for a much needed a reality check of migration brokerage rooted in market-driven and neoliberal systems as well as describe the implications to their personal, familial, social, and transnational lives.

This research has several limitations, which future studies could address. First, this study focussed on analysing TikTok videos. Scholars could further investigate the production of subversive content by interviewing Filipino migrant workers. This approach would further unpack the intricacies and complexities of producing and circulating subversive content. Second, examining the comments of audiences could be considered for future work (Cabalquinto and Soriano, 2020). In doing so, it could reveal the ways that a transnational networked public affirms or counters narratives by Filipino migrant workers. Lastly, future studies could investigate the ways in which governmental and migration agencies also utilise emerging technologies in brokering migration. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, this study has shed light on the crucial role of TikTok in enabling Filipino migrant workers to broker subversive narratives that demonstrate the pitfalls of an overseas life celebrated in a neoliberal global economy. 

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## Notes

1. Chee, 2023, p. 612.

2. Lorenzana, 2018, p. 146.

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