

Technology and Diaspora: Investigating Immigration Issues in Timog Online**Reggy Capacio Figer, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore****Catherine de Torres, Manuel S. Enverga University Foundation, Philippines****Abstract**

This study investigates the reciprocal relations of technology and diaspora through the examination of immigration issues in Timog Online forum. Through the types of messages conveyed by forum users, authors look at how these messages relate to in the cultivation of social capital. Timog Online forum serves as a virtual community among Filipinos in Japan. It provides information, support as well as communication platform to most Filipino migrants. This study, therefore, illustrates how forum users appropriated and utilized computer-mediated communication (CMC) like the Timog Online forum. It is hoped that concerns raised and resolved in the immigration forum can present the value of Internet as a bridge for community formation, engagement as well as the enhancement of Filipino migrants' social capital.

Keywords: Filipino Diaspora, Internet, Immigration Issues, Online Community

Introduction

Since the 1970s there has been a considerable exodus of Filipino labourers around the globe (Ponce 2008). Because of this significant trend of Filipino migration, studies of Filipino overseas workers and the utility of the word diaspora has proliferated (Ponce 2008). Most of these studies dealt with the socio-economic aspects of Filipino diaspora in different regional or national host countries. Some of these studies explored on the behavioural and psychological aspects of migrants as they dealt with the process of incorporation in the host societies. This paper, however, departs on these kinds of studies instead pursues on the aspect whereby the concept of diaspora is interlinked with Internet usage and migrant's social capital. It takes on Filipino migrants in Japan as a case study since Japan has been identified by the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA) as one of the preferred destinations of Filipinos for work (POEA 2010).

This study is enthused by several researches on the virtual community. Howard Rheingold's (1993) ground-breaking study on the virtual community ascertained the notion that there were many people who used the Internet as a way to form relationships and construct communities online. His case study elucidated that members in the San Francisco Bay area disclosed information about themselves more through the use of CMC. Through the bulletin board system (BBS), email-instant messaging and other technical interfaces, this study proved that more people now are getting in touch with each other through the use of Internet.

Nancy Baym's (2000) research in online communities is another influential one. In her study, she explicated the power of Internet to provide prospects for fans of television soap operas to link within a social network in order to make amity as well as build ties.

This phenomenon of more people getting involved with online communities is brought about by the technological revolution or as what Castells (2000) termed as Information Age, or Network Society. More and more people are wired and connected to the information highway regardless of geographical time and place. With this, information is now easily accessible.

According to Hamel (2009) in his Human Development Research Paper on Information and Communication Technologies and Migration, the International Telecommunications Union (2009) revealed that the Asian region has the biggest online community with China having the second largest national online communities in the world. The International Organization of Migration (2005) averred, “migration is not only influenced by ICTs, ICTs have become global drivers of migration” (in Hamel 2009, p. 1). Through ICTs, then, the world is getting smaller and closer every day.

Aside from creating virtual spaces for construction of communities, the Internet also affords building a sense of camaraderie and identity among online participants. In Mitra’s (1997) analysis of the soc.culture.indian newsgroup, he observed that the image of India and identity of Indians in the West were sporadic themes of discussion. He believed that these online spaces were the only common spaces online users have in order to establish affiliation with fellow nationals.

The relatively cheap and affordable cost of communication through the Internet also presents a unique way to aid migrants foster a ‘new’ sense of cultural and national belonging. The Internet, then, affords diasporic communities the agency to communicate and commune among themselves (Tynes 2007).

CMC, moreover, creates opportunities for social support among users. Studies on health benefits through support groups proliferated online (Coulson 2005; Braithwaite et al. 1999). Braithwaite et al. (1999), for example, investigated people with disabilities and how CMC groups presented messages of emotional and informational support among users. Apart from health-related support, CMC can also provide social support in terms of providing information, advice and guidance on immigration issues. This kind of support is uniquely tailored to people who are displaced and dislocated from the homeland, like the migrants. Carmen Gonzales’ (2009) study examined the relationship between online communities’ bulletin boards and issues on immigration. This research explored on social support messages in Univision Online’s Immigration Forum. Using content analysis as a method and social support as framework, she revealed that Latinos are “engaging in computer-mediated communication within a specific online community” (Gonzales 2009, p. 2). These messages expressed in this forum contributed to community building and

development of migrants' social capital. What's more, she noted, an online community such as the Univision for Latinos can be a potent force to influence and mobilize Latino immigrants.

The research by Gonzalez (2009) provided impetus for authors to do something similar. In this paper, the authors explored on immigration issues Filipino migrants are confronted with through the analyses of a specific online community. As migrants, their main concern is their immigration status; hence, in the online forum studied, message boards on immigration issues abound. Using thematic approach, it is hoped that authors contributed to the formation of knowledge and insights on the significant relationship of online communities and immigration issues and how this online forum could be an excellent information resource for immigrants who wish to incorporate themselves to their host society.

The idea of social capital has been a buzz word in the academic community as of late. There appears to be an agreement among social scientists that social capital is an important feature for viable and effective democracy to flourish (Valenzuela et. al. 2009; Newton 2006; Putnam & Gloss 2002). However, it is hard to pin down standard measures and tools since it encompasses a complex set of variables and concepts. A brief survey of literature on the subject showed that scholars defined social capital in terms of social networks, civic participation and trust (Putnam 2000; Coleman 1998; Bourdieu 1983).

For starters, Lin (2001) and Putnam (2004) circumscribed social capital as the available resources that people have through their social interactions. Hence, individuals with sizable, various networks are believed to have more social capital than those with little and less diverse networks (Valenzuela et. al. 2009).

In 2000, Putnam divulged a decreasing trend in participation on civic activities as an indicator of the decline of America's bridging social capital. He cited the increased use of media and technology as contributors to this decline, stopping to the point of including the then – rising Internet as part of the trend.

However, this notion of Putnam (2000) was debunked by other scholars. Waldinger & Licher (2003), for instance, believed that in the case of migrants, the Internet promote social capital through the social networks that are important resources for establishing linkage between the homeland and host society. These resources may come in the form of information or knowledge, support or trust online. Diamandaki (2003) did not discuss about social capital, however, she deemed that the Internet has created opportunities for social network to thrive and burgeon because of the pervasiveness and ubiquity of CMC and technology. Just like the case of dispersed Filipino migrants in Japan, this study assumes that Internet usage could lead to the cultivation of social capital through the resources and networks afforded by virtual communities. Hence, social capital is marked and forged through the interactions and exchanges between individuals online. Connecting and networking together directs to a more developed and enhanced social capital.

As Filipino migrants go through the process of incorporation in the host society and as they navigate the world of cyberlandia, they locate and discover Timog Online. Timog Online is the Internet portal of Filipino migrants in Japan because of the most number of members it has among other online communities (Timog Online 2009). This virtual community provides a sizable magnitude of information and supply of resources in both the host and homeland countries. Hence, forum users maximize the full potential of Timog Online especially on the immigration aspect. Thus, this study asks questions: What types of social support messages are communicated in Timog Online's immigration forum? How is Timog Online utilized to nurture Filipino migrants' social capital?

Methodology

In order to ascertain types of messages conveyed in Timog Online as well as its relation to social capital, the 'Visa and Legal' bulletin board was examined and explored. Online discussion boards are good platforms to observe discussions and debates among forum users. Also, a member could create fictitious name so as to remain anonymous. By doing so, forum users easily engage into discourse and exchange ideas without fear of being identified in the real world.

Thematic analysis was used to scrutinize exchanges of messages from forum users. Through these exchanges on the forum, authors deduced themes rather than have pre-existing categories (Glaser & Strauss 1967). To do this, data were probed through Blumer's (1979) method of inductive analysis and focused on "occurrence of its analytical objects in a particular context" (Pernia 2004, p. 18).

With qualitative data at hand, verification then suggests quality (Robson 2002). As such, verification and validation were achieved through rich quotations from forum users. These quotations create face validity to readers to assess the veracity of the themes (Robson 2002).

Data Source

Data were collected from Timog Online forum. An online forum is kind of message board where users engage in talk or discussion through initiating new topic for discussion or simply inserting remarks to formerly posted messages. Timog Online provides information and communication to Filipino migrants in Japan. Membership in this cyber-community is open, quick and anonymous: 'open' since anyone can join the forum, 'quick' because registration only takes a few seconds and can participate already in discussions, and 'anonymous' because no identification details are required to join the site. The order of the site is maintained by a forum moderator. He or she also keeps track of themes and answers queries about the operation and management of Timog Online.

Seven links comprise Timog Online forum: (1) General, (2) Community, (3) Living, (4) Recreation, (5) Off-topic, (6) Students and (7) Market.

Each link generates replies from forum users according to the topic posted for discussion except if the thread was deleted by the moderator.



Image 1. Timog Online BBS

The screenshot shows the Timog Forum homepage. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for Home, Forums, Blogs, FAQ, Rules, Terms, Contact, and Register. Below the navigation is the Timog.com logo and a search bar. The main content area has sections for PC & TECH, PASTIMES, TRAVEL, NIHONGO, BUNAY JAPAN, LEGAL, TRANSLATION, BUY & SELL, and JOBS. A "OFFTOPIC" section is also present. Below these are links for Register, Blogs, FAQ, and Calendar. A "Welcome to Timog Forum!" message is displayed, followed by a note about first-time visitors. The main feature is a "Forum Discussions" section with a table showing various topics. The columns include Forum, Last Post, Threads, and Posts. Topics listed include "Frontpage Items", "Forum Announcements", "Forum Feedback & Questions", "Forum Tips & Howtos", "Timog Community", "Visa & Legal Issues", "Buyah Japan", "News Items", "Home and Family", and "Health and Fitness". Each topic entry includes a thumbnail, the title, the poster's name, the post date, and the number of threads and posts.

Source: Screenshot from the website <http://www.timog.com/forums> on 13 January 2010.

Results of the Analysis

Depending on the needs, Timog Online affords Filipinos in Japan the appropriate information and support for them. Aside from range of interests this site offers, Timog Online further provides opportunities for members to interact and seek help. Through BBS, Filipino migrants ask advice and support from their fellow countrymen. Timog Online also allows Filipinos to gain better understanding of issues they encounter in the host society as well as relate their experiences to fellow migrants in Japan.

It is a known fact that obtaining citizenship in Japan is difficult. A migrant needs to pass through the eye of a needle's hole, so to speak. The very core of their citizenship law acknowledges only people with Japanese blood, by decent or right by blood. For migrant workers to stay and work, they must acquire temporary visa that lasts for 90 days. If they want to continue work, they can extend by applying for special permit from Ministry of Justice, Japan (MOJ 2009).

Most of the forum users believe that Filipinos with terminated passports have two choices to stay and work in Japan. One is to submit to Japanese authorities and go back to the Philippines then return to Japan after serving the penalty. Two is to get married with Japanese national to declare a spouse visa. The latter is always the best option for most especially for visa-less women who bore child out of wedlock. To avoid deportation, they would ask their Japanese partners to marry them and recognize the child as theirs. This way they could claim the spouse visa. Marriage visas have been a quick and easy way out for most visa-less Filipinos in Japan (Da-anoy 2008; Cameron and Newman 2008).

Overstayers are migrants not able to find better options to stay in Japan but decided to continue residing and escape deportation. In order for overstayers not to be understood and identified by Japanese people, they use the term *bilog* for themselves and for other Filipinos to distinguish them. *Bilog* is Filipino term which means circle or round. It denotes the “O” in overstayers.

Timog Online comes into the picture as this functions mainly as an information hub for Filipino migrants in Japan. The dilemma of facing immigration authorities was perfectly mirrored on posts of ‘Visa and Legal’ forum. This forum with several threads provides social support by furnishing members with pertinent information in the form of advice, suggestion, referral, appraisal and teaching (Cutrona & Suhr 1992).

To Surrender or Not: A Dilemma for the Filipino Bilog

For *bilog*, the idea of surrendering to authorities is a sticky situation. The fear of detention, penalty fees and possible traumatic jail experience are uncertainties that overstayer confronts. He also does not want to go back to his country because he knows that his future is bleak there. If he goes back home, there is no work for him; if he gets work, he will have a very low salary, so the *bilog* would rather stay in Japan for economic reasons. Overstayers who are members of Timog Online ask help and advice from their fellow migrants about their situation. The exchanges of messages between migrants about their problems appeared enlightening and informative since responses to queries contained detailed information of facts. A number of discussions on specific laws of immigration and paperwork processing were posted by forum users.

Posts from Timog Online revealed several intimations of *bilog* who were reluctant to surrender to immigration authorities. Their desire to work in Japan to secure financial stability made *bilog* not want to go home to their country. Others intimated in knowing first the penalties so that they could return home and have proper documents. Some, however, planned to earn a living legally and resolve issues concerning their immigration status, while others aimed to pursue marriage as an option.

As one Overstayer Asked:

Hi! I'm Mina, just would like to ask because I'm planning to surrender. My problem is I didn't use my real name and age in the passport, is there a possibility for me not to be able to return to Japan for more than a year because my bf would like to marry me next year. He is worried that I might not be able to return here in Japan if I surrendered, how many years will be the penalty if I go home?)

Dkid replied:

Most of what I've heard, they got married first here before they surrendered and that's it, they were not sent home. There are lots of changes in laws about this, so the experiences before may not be applicable today.

Filipinos' high regard on their hard-earned money is also evident on the posts. Overstaying members calculated their expenses should they surrender and compare its worth to the chance of earning more while avoiding arrest. This displayed how Filipinos applied foresight in calculating penalties versus risks. As Aimi2819 shared in her post:

I have a friend who is in hiding, he wants to surrender and go home to the Philippines, he's asking me what is the process but I don't know it, I'm wondering if you know how to surrender and he also asked how much would the penalty cost, I hope you'll be able to answer this, so that when he calls me again I can help him on what he needs to do... Thank you.

The line that said "*I hope you'll be able to answer this, so that when he calls me again I can help him on what he needs to do*" displayed how fellow migrants are obliging and kind in lending a hand to fellow Filipino who is in a state of distress. Timog Online

serves as a platform for communication where migrants can share and mobilize information for the good and welfare of other migrants, especially those confronted with immigration issues. Posts also indicate members yearning for information and knowledge in the hope that their trepidations and anxieties will be assuaged.

Sponsorship for Filipinos turned Bilog

The issue on sponsorship for Filipinos also emerged as a theme in the forum. Posts revealed that some migrants arrived in Japan legally through the help of sponsors.

The usual sponsors are the Japanese nationals who are married to Filipino migrants. Filipinos with good residence status in Japan can also exercise sponsorship of their family and friends.

With sponsorship, there is a great possibility for entry in the host society. However, the problem sets in when migrants' visa expires and they go into hiding to avoid deportation. *Bilog* in the forum shared how their sponsors have helped them obtain temporary visa. However, sponsors refused to assist *bilog* in submitting them to authorities due to fear of punishment of supporting a migrant to enter Japan but only to violate immigration laws.

Aimi2819 started this thread about sponsorship. Answers to the inquiry were not only for *bilog* but extended to all users of the site:

Good evening! I'm sorry if I have additional question, my friend would like to surrender but his brother in law who is his sponsor would not help him, he was told to do it alone. I would like to help him however I don't know what should be done. Please help us!

An administrator of Timog Online Responded:

About your question, I haven't heard of a sponsor who was held accountable. Perhaps there is a possibility that he may not be able to sponsor for a certain time. Perhaps that is the penalty. But in their rules, there's none. They only identify those who violated their rules. That's why I don't invite my friends to come here even if they asked me to do. It'll be difficult to be implicated. I don't want to lose my visa.

Dkid Agreed with the Administrator:

You are right! My colleague, a Japanese, was the sponsor of the relatives of his wife, even if the youngest sibling of his wife whom he sponsored ran away, when he surrendered, my colleague was not penalized.

The exchange of information by online users on the sponsorship issue yielded impressions that there are no clear cut policies that guide sponsors and migrants alike. Forum users were not able to point out specific violations and penalties that sponsors will obtain should the migrant violated rules. Most of the replies described apprehensions of sponsors.

There were posts, however, that denoted interest from the part of *bilog* to submit themselves to authorities with or without the help of their sponsors. Some forum users asked for exact location/address of Japan immigration main office so they can surrender there. Through the goodwill of online members, they gave directions and provided links on how to go to the immigration office.

These posts strikingly demonstrated the potential of the immigration forum to keep abreast with the needs of the Filipino migrants in Japan. There were no trivial things left unanswered on the message board. Forum users were always on the look-out for people who need help. They do their best to support and solve concerns raised in Timog Online. Forum members lived up with the promise of forum – be “useful” and “accessible”.

Narrating Experiences of Surrender and Arrest

Online users shared their own or friend’s experiences as they surrendered voluntarily or when they underwent arrest. *Bilog* who remained concealed in the forum are given a bird’s eye view of the scenario should he surrendered or arrested. Forum users narrated lengthily details of arrest, imprisonment and deportation process. Posts also provided comparison of penalties, degree of punishment and paper requirements for expatriation.

Docomo Started this Topic by Asking Questions:

Someone asked me to inquire about this, for example, you were arrested..will you go straight to the jail? Meaning they will put you in a detention place for overstay before they send you home, isn't it that you're allowed first to get your personal belongings in your house before you get jailed. You still have few important things that you would like to bring home to the Philippines especially those who don't have relatives in Japan??

Striver Replied:

My friend's boyfriend was arrested last year, he was going to ride the train when he was spotted. The first detention place that you'll go to would depend on the police who arrested you. There is a van or bus that awaits for those who are arrested. This van or bus will drop you off to the main immigration office.

He Continued:

About your belongings, they will not get anything from you. You still own all of it. You will be the one responsible if you are going to send them to the Philippines. They won't confiscate your things. Perhaps that would be their problem where to dispose them because if they do, they still would pay for it.

Depp Participated in the Discussion Saying:

What I learned from my friend who got arrested was that he was able to go home but he was given limited time, only few minutes to get some important things then it's up to you how you are going to ask someone to get the things you left behind.

Online users never failed to impart their own experiences or testimonies of their close friends to answer and give information to the queries of beleaguered members. Remarkable in these threads were the encouragement of online members to undocumented forum users to surrender voluntarily and abide Japan's immigration policies.

Thanks to Timog Online! Job Well Done!

Several members applauded moderators and administrators of Timog Online as these individuals never failed to take time out in answering the queries of distressed members.

Most members even mentioned that the information that they got from the threads guided them in their quest for a more peaceful stay in Japan at the same time made them rethink of breaking rules or not complying with the policies and regulations set by the government of Japan. And for those members who have disobeyed the rules and are now caught in a dilemma of whether to surrender or not, online forums have provided them the knowledge and support that they need in order to prepare themselves for the surrender or arrest. In this way, the burden is lessened on the part of the Filipino *bilog*.

Sayonara Japan, Hello America

A great number of online members confer and talk about bidding goodbye to Japan and saying hello to the United States of America (USA). Hence, messages on application for US Visa, paperwork processing and interview portion abound.

Under paperwork processing, online members helped each other by providing information on what is the most convenient way of applying for US Visa. Members gave their pieces of advice and suggestions cautiously as there are no specific guidelines on who can obtain single entry or multiple entry visa. There is also no assurance given to members on who can acquire 5 or 10 years visa validity. What online members discussed in “Visa and Legal Issues” forums is how to prove to US Embassy their need to travel and establish credibility that they would return to their country of origin.

America draws a great deal of migrants from different countries around the world, who want to live and work there, and Filipinos are of no exception. Though they have excellent jobs and earning heaps of money in Japan, Filipinos still desire and yearn to experience the potentials and guarantees of the “Land of the Free”.

The posts in the forum did not reveal exactly why Filipinos in Japan covet to migrate to America but Alejandro Mayorkas, the head of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, mentioned two: either because they yearn for freedom or because they are fleeing something (The Economist 2009). Also in the same article, it was implied that Japan’s lifetime-employment system does not accommodate foreigners (The Economist 2008); hence, US is likely better option to go.

As forum users shared their experiences in applying for US Visa, they apparently compared immigration policies of these two big economies. Both Japan and US have rigorous paperwork processing but amazingly as The Economist (2009) stated Japan is more “tolerant” than US especially after the 9/11 incident.

Online users who intend to apply for US visa were oriented by their fellow Timog users to different types of visa given, length of time they could stay in the US, bank accounts and stock certificates they need to present to embassy.

Forum users also imagined scenarios of the hassle-dazzle of interviews at the embassy. These threads presented the emotional support members could get from each other, aside from the information that they could share. Encouragement was expressed through a number of good lucks, God blesses and smiley and heartening emoticons seen at the end of posts.

Remarkable in these forums was the give and take relationship of the users. Forum users who were helped during their application process find time to help others in need too by sharing what had happened to them. Thus, this posited that as immigration laws change with time, members of online community continued to spread information. They too update these data for those who will need it in the future. This kind of transaction of information sharing among online users in Timog forum proved how cyber community could nurture migrant's social capital.

One of the ubiquitous topics tackled in relation to US Visa application was the September 11 incident. Most users believed that after the 9/11, US immigration has become more stringent and more rigorous in their screening process. This tight grip led to difficulty of foreign workers to obtain visa. The process has been changed to large extent. The Embassy already requires personal appearance at the US Embassy for interview. Unlike before the application by mail could be processed by a travel agency, which gives convenience to US Visa applicants. Requirements are rigid. Processing fees and even inquiries about the application are now costly.

Noteworthy to say then, online communities were instrumental in providing information support in the forms of teaching, advice and specific actions (Cutrona and Suhr 1992). In this case, forum users supplied detailed instructions and descriptions of paperwork process for US Visa application. Timog Online users were able to enumerate requirements to check, validate and verify before going to the US Embassy. This somehow saves time, energy/effort and cost to Filipino migrants.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper emphasized the increasing role of Internet in helping migrants through information and support in their journey towards assimilation to the host society. Through online communities, globally dispersed individuals are provided with venues to communicate and nurture each other's needs. The value of Internet becomes manifest as it aids to improve their condition in the host society.

The authors used messages posted on Visa and Legal Issues forum to demonstrate its functionality. It serves as migrant's virtual family. The online forum illustrated how illegal and registered Filipino migrants co-exist harmoniously. They supported each other especially in times of need, particularly in the case of *bilog* who have little chances to speak up and assert their rights because they have stayed in the host country illegally. In such case, *bilog* are considered to be invisible in the society and constantly in fear of being caught in deportation raid (Gonzales 2009).

As the immigration forum secured the anonymity of overstayers, these undocumented Filipino migrants shared their struggles to live decently in Japan. Evidently expressed through posts was the desire of overstayers to conform to Japan's immigration policies. Since they are *bilog*, they are always in state of fear and wary of their lives if caught by police.

Most Filipino migrants confessed that they overstayed because of the lure of high salary which they cannot receive in their country. Hence, they took risks of working without the necessary permit. They also knew that their hiding from authorities will come to end that is why they utilized Timog Online to seek information and support from fellow Filipinos. Through this, it hastened their decision-making of whether to surrender or not.

This study ascertains that Filipino migrants in Japan found an alliance in Timog Online. Through this community, overstayers armed themselves with adequate information before submitting to authorities. In this way, *bilog* faced consequences with preparation and acceptance. They were able to arrange means for immediate support from friends and family members.

Their deportation process is expedited. This is what Mitra (2001) posits in his article that the pervasiveness of Internet allowed immigrants to form ties that promote sense of belonging and commonality. That sense of belonging and commonality instigated a sense of camaraderie and community amongst them.

Filipino overstayers were afraid of a lot of things. Most commonly expressed were fears of traumatic detention, permanent banishment, high cost of penalty fees, encroachment of their sponsors and among others. Despite these fears, the message board reflected optimism of *bilog* to confront their dilemma since they know that their online friends will support them in the forms of teaching, advice and specific actions (Cutrona and Suhr 1992). The information provided to them enlightened *bilog* and helped them arrived at the best possible solution. The exchanges of messages aided online users in setting the right expectations and in rethinking of their goals and actions.

Succinctly, the functionality of Timog Online is highlighted by the fact that just like a real community, online communities grow, expand and serve their purposes as more people participate and recognize their value. Timog Online proved that its usefulness is beyond what one can imagine. From simple questions to difficult situations that invite cooperation and compassion, Timog Online became a platform for social support and a resource for information.

The authors believed that Timog Online was successful in engaging members to disclose problems and experiences because members gained benefits as well through learning, teaching and receiving suggestions. Thus, this invariable presence of members in online forums confirm that CMC can maintain social networks the way face to face interaction would (Walter 1996).

Moreover, Filipino overstayers became members of online forum not just to seek information and resolve their personal concerns. The forum showed interaction of users which did not stop in information sharing that can benefit only a certain individual but it revealed the power of the forum to touch lives, bring new hopes and sustain the confidence of overstayers that they can still assert their rights, speak up and live a normal life in Japan. Forum users became so attached that they treated online members like family or friend. These results are similar to what Braithwaite, Waldron and Finn (1999) discovered when they explored social support in computer-mediated groups for people with disabilities and found that the messages posted in the group provided emotional and informational support for the users, just like in a family or friend would do.

Therefore, the opportunity offered by online communities for Filipino overstayers to air their concerns without the harm of being punished by authorities paved way for enhancement of social capital. Online forums provided speaking space or the ability to have a voice in cyberspace which Mitra (2001) refers to as a “gain of capital”.

Forums users were able to guide those who were confused or needs clarity in certain policies. What made these narratives on these forums truthful and convincing were testimonies given as forms of assurances that ‘everything will be fine’. Accounts were taken seriously with personal touch as users related their narratives to exemplify their experiences of situation. Evidently, exchanges of insights and ideas in online forums showed forum users appropriation of CMC because this enhanced their lifestyle and made them aware of the culture of the host country in which they are exposed to.

In a nutshell, online forums became supportive environments for a community which will never exist have they not found a place in cyberspace. Significantly, Filipino migrants especially overstayers had a chance of improving their lives in Japan through information and resources in the forum.

The BBS was also used by forum users to inquire about US Visa application particularly asking the nitty-gritty details of paperwork processing and doing interviews. Though the discussion is not limited to sharing of experiences of how exacting US immigration

policies are, there are no messages that would straightforwardly tell why Filipino migrants in Japan yearn to be in US. Most messages focused in obtaining information about processing fees, paper requirements, interview schedules and the like.

In Japan, foreign workers are continued to be ‘outsiders’ in the labor force (Noguchi 2009). Japan’s closed society is one reason for this. Most Japanese believed that influx of people with different cultural backgrounds will result to tarnishing of their national identity. However, in recent years, Japan has opened up its gates to foreigners to meet the demands of the nation along side with the advent of globalization and information highway (Graburn, Ertl & Tierney 2008).

Though forum users obviously compare stringent immigration policies of Japan and US in their information sharing, there are no posts that would indicate dislike, discontent or any fault that would highlight migrants’ preference to US over Japan. No one in the forum mentioned about the ability of America to adapt to different cultures as opposed to the strong commitment of Japan to preserve its unique cultural heritage and identity. Online members didn’t blame Japan’s move to put robots in the workforce (The Economist 2008) instead of expanding employment opportunities to foreign migrants. Moreover, neither forum users praised US in its approach to absorb raw talents of foreign countries (Noguchi 2009).

Both countries set strict immigration policies to protect their native-borns. For instance, the US does not explicitly seek foreigners for employment. It is just that migrants are lured with US’ multiculturalism set-up (The Economist 2009). Posts in online forum expressed high hopes and positive thinking of getting visa despite rigid application process. Their anxieties to face the consul for interview were also manifested online. Though Filipino migrants’ posts did not indicate benefits of getting visa and going to US, it appears that the main motivation for this is fulfilling that ‘American dream’. Since the Philippines was colonized by US before not to mention the ubiquity of US media and educational system in the Philippines, it is no wonder that Filipinos are very much ensnared to live and work in the US.

On the other hand, Japan's strict immigration policy is aligned to their maintaining of homogenous culture. Though Japan is slowly opening up to the world, migrants are still encouraged to go back to their homelands to lend a hand, rediscover their roots and share the skills they have learned in Japan to their fellow countrymen (The Economist 2008).

This paper highlighted the use of Internet as an effective platform for information and support especially to beleaguered Filipino migrants. Needless to say, Timog Online afforded users to save money, time and effort in asking queries to proper authorities. The costly inquiries at the embassies, consultation fees of immigration lawyers and processing fees for unfamiliar documents were eliminated as online forums' members guide each other in following procedures in applying for US visa. Each member monitored queries of co-members who are having difficulty in getting their visas. The concern for each other among Filipinos in Japan as manifested online proved Filipinos' nationalistic fervor is translated to extending their help to their fellow countrymen who are in need. The Internet becomes the emissary to make all these support, guidance and care happen.

As a conclusion, this paper presented the notion that the Internet is instrumental in enhancing the way of life of Filipinos outside their homeland. It proved that online communities like Timog Online can improve the life condition of Filipino migrants in Japan.

The study discovered that Filipino overstayers used the Internet particularly the 'Visa and Legal issues' message board as speaking space to seek help, without putting their illegal status open to risk of deportation. The Filipino *bilog* gained information on how to prepare himself and his family as soon as he chooses to surrender voluntarily or undergo arrest. Ironically, the fears of imprisonment, penalties and permanent expulsion were replaced with assurance of safety and chance for start-over. Online members were consistent in encouraging overstayers to conform to Japan's immigration policies.

The exchange of narratives and testimonies empowered overstayers in doing the right thing. Forum users enlightened unregistered Filipino migrants about the advantage of submitting themselves to authorities and serving the penalties imposed by the Ministry of

Justice in Japan. Immigration posts emphasized that undocumented Filipino workers can return to Japan, this time to live decently and pursue marriage.

The study also exposed the ambiguity of sponsorship policies in Japan. Forum users appeared to be clueless of exact violations and consequences of sponsoring migrants who ended up as overstayers. Therefore, a review on sponsorship policies can secure the interests of both sponsors and migrants. By presenting clear cut guidelines, sponsors can provide better assistance to migrants which in the end could help prevent overstaying of migrants to happen. Also, overstayers can surrender without the fear of impinging their sponsors.

In addition, the immigration forum served as an interactive reference panel for information-seekers. It paved the way for participants to feel cared about, the way a face to face conversation would relieve or ease problems. Internet has made it possible for unfamiliar people bound by a certain commonality, which in this case their national identity to achieve meaningful discourses on immigration policies in Japan thus enhancing social relationships.

Evidently, the message board has furnished Filipino migrants with useful details on how they should sustain their confidence despite the tough US Visa application and remind every forum member to abide to Japan's equally stringent immigration policies. The study revealed that forum users gained better understanding of the immigration policies set by the two big countries. It is interesting to note that both US and Japan implement rigid processing of foreign migrants' documents to ensure the welfare of its constituents.

Remarkable in this study is that the Internet usage is not limited to trade, advertising or simple exchange of how are you's. The power of Internet to connect people across the globe cannot be measured merely by counting the frequency of log-ins in a site or number of participants in an online community. Internet empowers people through the quality of information shared in the online community. Hence, the impact of posts is not tangible but it creates a change that nurtures the social capital. In this study, the information and emotional support that online members shared in the forum enhanced the lifestyle of Filipino migrants in Japan. The participation of these migrants in online

communities illustrated that social capital cannot be cultivated solely through exchange of products or services but how information was used by online members to improve their way of living.

The study further proved the importance of Internet as a cost-effective bridge in supporting globally dispersed Filipinos by saving time, money and effort. Thus, Internet is utilized as the most affordable and convenient technological fix of convergence across the globe.

At present, the real number of overstayers, illegal workers or even permanent residents in various diaspora all over the world may not coincide with their population on the Internet but this study presupposed that their growth in the future would not be impossible. Internet's potential as an agent in building communities online is an emerging phenomenon to think about.

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