
Weaving Faith and Social Capital on the Net: The Case of Filipino Migrants in Japan

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Introduction

This paper is a thematic analysis of messages posted on *Timog Online* forum, particularly on the 'Religion and Inspiration' message board. The author looks at what types of religious messages are communicated by the forum's users and how these messages may lead to, and play a role in the cultivation of social capital. *Timog* forum is a website community that accommodates Filipinos, or anyone with concern and interest in making lives of Filipinos better in Japan. This study illustrates how Filipino Internet users appropriate and engage in computer-mediated communication (CMC) through *Timog Online*. It is hoped that religious messages expressed in the forum can make up for the lack of community formation and engagement, while building on Filipino migrants' social capital.

Filipino Migration and Religion

Filipinos who depart from their country of origin either for personal or economic reasons do not disembark bare, empty or void (Tigno, 2007). Along with their motives and intentions, they bring with them practices, traditions, and values from their home country. Much of these social habits and cultural norms would reveal and manifest in their actions as they go through life at the host society. Practicing religiosity is a fundamental custom that Filipinos carry with them wherever they go. This religiosity is one of the most deeply entrenched features of their national identity.

As history would show, the Philippines has been colonized by the Spaniards for more than 300 years (Agoncillo, 1990). This occupation has resulted in religious practices and traditions that are extremely rooted in the Filipino psyche (Cacho, 2007; Tigno, 2007). It also embraces faith in an omniscient God and integrates ceremonials of Catholicism as indoctrinated by Spaniards. Needless to say, Catholics comprise a sizable portion of the country's population (Cannell, 1999). Filipinos, thenceforth, have deep linkage with religiosity, and accordingly, inculcate religious involvement and commitment even in migration.

The tradition of celebrating Christmas in the Philippines is an example of how religious custom is ingrained in Filipinos' minds. Though far from the homeland, Filipinos commemorate Christmas with a festive mood, marked by rituals and religious practices.

Nostalgia, likewise, for the home country is an intrinsic part of Filipino experience living abroad. In order to assuage the feeling of homesickness, Filipino migrants gather in groups to portray fiestas, in honor of saints, and hold Christmas the Filipino way. These undertakings give them the ambiance that they are back in the homeland. As devout Catholics, Filipino migrants go to church regularly, take part in fiestas, and memorialize saint's birthday or demise. These acts perform a significant part in articulating their being a Filipino. These help in re-creating and maintaining their Filipino identity in the process as they interact,

relate, and network with fellow Filipino migrants. Therefore, a Filipino citizen does not lose his/her national identity in another country but foster more his/her pride as a Filipino.

With the advent of new media and technology, the Internet has become a new medium for Filipino migrants to convey their being Filipinos. The Internet has also provided an avenue for migrants to be more interactive in their country of origin as well as their local place of worship (Cheon & Pong, 2009). This premise of practicing faith online offers a shift of perspective from the customary exercise of faith. Praying is not anymore confined inside the church; the Internet now has become a new pathway for religious communication and transnational religious movements (Cheong & Poon, 2009). Hence, this development on the practice of faith online is worthy of note and study.

Religion on the Net

The advent of globalization has brought in the emergence of new media and technology. Apprehensions abound in the initiation of new media and development of technology, as some argue that this would lead to the debility of religious practices and a swing towards atheist beliefs. This 'secularization' (Stark, 1999) notion has paved way for the argument that "modernization and religion are inherently incompatible, and that gains in modernization would lead to loss of religion" (Kluver & Cheong, 2007, p.2). This assumption has stirred debates both in favor and against this 'secularization'.

Several studies show the relationship of Internet and religion in different perspectives. A study by Hoover et. al (2004) discloses that in the U.S., approximately 82 million people use the Internet for religious and spiritual purposes. A similar study conducted on Internet use in the U.S. found that the number of people seeking religious information online had nearly doubled in 2002 (Madden, 2003). Moreover, Bedell (2000) cites that users are finding religious information online to be copious; meanwhile, Campbell (2005) mentions that users often see the Internet fit for spiritual purposes. These studies point out that the Internet has become a tool for the practice of faith and religiosity.

For migrants, the Internet is viewed as a platform for appreciating God and renewing faith. The Internet may now operate, using its potential for global exchange and communication, for barter of religious information, goods or merchandise (Cheong & Poon, 2008). Levitt (2007), meanwhile, highlights the Internet as a means for religious 'social remittances', which include chains of religious artifacts and practices. Access to the virtual Bible and words of God are afforded. Prayer requests are sent online and believers who seek for interpretation and words of wisdom can now be found on the web. In recent years, studies on the interfaces between issues of migration, religion and Internet usage have proliferated (Helland, 2007; Chen, 2006; Vertovec, 1999). It is, therefore, the goal of this paper to establish a connection how Filipino migrants nourish their faith through the Internet, explore their religious practices that surface during their interaction online, and investigate how these interfaces amongst them cultivate social capital.

Filipino Diaspora and the Internet

In a recent survey, the Internal Affairs and Communications Ministry of Japan revealed that the penetration rate of Internet users in the country is 75.3 percent, placing Japan as the 3rd in the world based on its number of users, with China in the first place, and the U.S. in the second place (Internet World Stats, 2009).

For the Filipino diaspora in Japan, the Internet has become a new medium for articulating and maintaining national identities in the host environment (Figer, 2009). Being a member of online communities strengthens their Filipinoness, and in going online, they become a part of a virtual family. Migrants are then equipped with two tasks, going online to survive, and sustain an identity in the host land, while working in solidarity with those facing challenges at home (Parham, 2001).

Timog Online is one of those relevant websites. Created in 2004, it was developed for Filipinos in Japan in search of friendship and common identity. It started as a place “where Filipinos can meet, share their experiences and help each other” (Timog Online, 2009). With its growing membership, *Timog Online* addresses the migrant’s quest to belong. To date, it boasts the following statistics: 14,147 members, 92,127 threads and 1,181, 294 posts (Timog Online, 2009). With this data, *Timog Online* is, arguably, the Filipino migrants Internet portal choice in Japan.

Timog Online has multipurpose functions, from being an online library of news and updates about the Philippines and Japan, to being a source of information through its bulletin boards for “PC & Tech, Games and Hobbies, Movies and TV, Travel, Nihongo, Living, Legal, Translation, Buy and Sell, Jobs and Off topics” (Timog Online, 2009). It also provides information about the culture and mores of Japanese people.

The website is visited and revisited for its online forums and blogs. These are the most popular services offered where members of the community participate, enter chat rooms and create their own personal blogs. The topics for discussion are wide ranging, from politics, religion, current events to personal experiences, and can be initiated by any member or moderator. English and Filipino are the predominant languages used.

Since this paper delves into the linkage between migration, religiosity, and the Internet, the author purposely chose to examine religious messages. Conveniently, *Timog Online* has an ongoing forum on “Religion & Inspiration” with 655 threads and 14,078 posts (Timog Online, 2009). The said forum is a great value as the author explores the dynamics of Internet use among Filipino migrants in Japan vis-à-vis religiosity and ultimately, the development of migrants’ social capital.

Religiosity, the Internet, and Social Capital

Social capital is the cooperative importance of all collective networks one has and the proclivities that surface or develop from these networks in order to accomplish things for each other. A number of studies, essentially, have been carried out on Internet use and its relation to migration and social capital. The basic premise, however, is that the Internet has greatly assisted the globalization process as new media and technologies have facilitated a higher intensity of exchanges and transactions, and augmented travels and contacts among people (Portes et al., 1999). Putnam (2000), additionally, emphasizes that the Internet could have a dual capacity regarding social capital: the Internet could be a cause for the decline of social capital or it could reinforce both online and offline ties thereby enhancing social networks. These assumptions of Putnam (2000) contribute to the idea that social capital is invariably reflected and articulated at basic levels of interaction – the community. In this paper, community engagement is investigated in *Timog Online* where religious interactions and messages abound.

In terms of research area on the mutual interaction between religion and cyberspace, it is still a small but thriving field (Cheong & Poon, 2008). Nonetheless, previous studies have been conducted on virtual communities (Rheingold, 1993), the new emerging religions (Dawson & Cowan, 2004; O’Leary, 1996), and the virtual church (Schroeder, Heather & Lee, 1998). Helland (2007) made some interesting observations when he studied how Jewish and Hindu online forum users link up with their families they had left behind in their home countries. This has led him to uncover religious practices, long-distance rituals, and cyber pilgrimages. It can then be predicted that Filipino migrants who engage in online discussions through *Timog Online* may live out religious ceremonies and rites with community members. This online transaction can facilitate the formation of human and social capital carved out from the process of CMC, which can satisfy a Filipino migrant’s hunger for a home-based religion.

Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai (2005) in their study, meanwhile, reveal how the Internet could be a ‘cultured

technology'. Religious elites of an ultra-Orthodox Jewish community utilize the Internet to suit their cultural needs, sustain, and reinforce their beliefs and values for the maintenance of their social hierarchy in the community. Robinson's (2004) analysis of websites, on the other hand, focuses on the spread of religious fundamentalist beliefs. His conclusion is that Internet plays a significant role in the construction of transnational religious identities among the Hindu middle class in the U.S. From aforementioned studies, one can construe that the Internet, through its limitless potential, can be shaped and molded for any purpose, which includes activism, political and religious debates and discourses (Ho, Baber & Khondker, 2002).

It must be noted, however, that to date, there have been no studies conducted on Filipino migrants in Japan and their usage of the Internet, specifically their practice of religiosity. No literature is available as to how users of *Timog Online* communicate with other members of the virtual community or about the type of content the site provides for Filipino diaspora users in Japan. It is, therefore, essential to understand the online communication patterns of those who participate in online communities such as *Timog Online*.

Based on the interrelatedness of religiosity, CMC and social capital, the following research questions are then posed: (1) What types of religious messages are communicated in *Timog Online*'s forum and (2) How is *Timog Online* used and appropriated to construct and cultivate Filipino migrants' social capital?

Method

To understand the types of religious messages articulated on a migrant forum and its relation to migrant-specific social capital, *Timog Online*'s 'religious and inspiration' bulletin board has been examined. One of the most important features of online discussion boards is the opportunity they offer to observe discourses and exchanges of ideas among member users. Moreover, the identity of members can be withheld as they can create pseudonyms of choice. Protected by a practice of anonymity, forum users are able to discuss, debate, and join intriguing conversations without the fear of being exposed or identified in the real world.

The messages among online members have been explored and examined through thematic analysis. Through the messages on the forum, the author has been able to extract themes rather than assume pre-existing categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To do this, data were studied through Blumer's (1979) method of inductive analysis, with focus given to the "occurrence of its analytical objects in a particular context" (Pernia, 2004, p.18).

With emphasis on obtaining qualitative data, verification then implies quality (Robson, 2002). As such, verification and validation were achieved through rich quotations from online posters, which gave face validity to its readers and integrity of the themes (Robson, 2002). A quantitative aspect was also presented to demonstrate descriptive statistics of activity postings on *Timog Online*.

Data Source

Data for this thematic analysis was collected from *Timog Online* forum. The forum is an online message board where *Timog Online* users can post original messages or give comment(s) on previously posted messages. This site caters specifically to the Filipino migrants in Japan by providing information about the culture and mores of Japanese people, news and updates from the homeland, and issues that Filipinos face in Japan. Membership to the *Timog Online* forum is open, quick, and anonymous: 'open' because everyone can join, 'quick' because one can register and participate in the forums in less than five minutes, and 'anonymous' because the site does not require stringent personal details from its members. A forum moderator maintains the order and keeps track of themes. And if questions arise, members can simply post their messages addressed to the moderator.

The *Timog Online* forum is divided into seven links: (1) General, (2) Community, (3) Living, (4) Recreation, (5) Off-topic, (6) Students, and (7) Market. In these seven links, religious posts are found in the 'Religion & Inspiration' section of the Off-topic group. From the 'Religion & Inspiration' section, there are 655 threads with 14,078 posts. In order to manage the bulk of messages from the forum, the author has decided to analyze the messages within a specific time frame. Messages posted from January 1–June 30, 2009 (first half of 2009) were included in the analysis.

For authenticity purposes, quoted replies and posts are retained in their form, including spelling and syntax. The author has also removed all headers for quotations from posters. For ease of reading though, some misspelled words and phrases are signified with "sic." All panel names (which are members' pseudonyms) are retained which may or may not necessarily mirror the member's politics, and are italicized in order to provide distinction.

Results

In the course of data gathering, *Timog Online's* culture has come to light. Through the interactions among its members, activities of the site operations have been understood. The participant of the online community is responsible for his/her own confidentiality. He/She is also accountable for any personal information that he/she divulges online. It is also understood that messages posted in the forum are not immediately sifted and sorted. However, offensive materials or messages posted on the site are deleted. The forum moderator keeps track of the themes and/or questions in each forum and offers a list of messages/websites that provide more information or answers to questions or queries.

The administrators and moderators of the site, likewise, have defined some rules and regulations regarding site operations. These have been stipulated in the terms of service that the users have agreed upon, such as, "upon posting of the content the user grants *Timog Forum* the non-exclusive grants to publish, modify and use of such content solely for purposes of displaying such content" (Timog Online, 2009). Also, as the character of the Internet is a public space, censorship of discussions is at low levels. However, participants are banned from posting "rude, inflammatory or insulting messages as well as hoaxes, chain letters, fake virus warnings and trite inspirational messages" (Timog Online, 2009). Participants are also expected to exhibit politeness and tolerance on sensitive topics that may arouse different opinions, such as politics, religion, and ethics (Timog Online, 2009).

Table 1 summarizes the activities in the 'Religion and Inspiration' section and the frequency percentage of each against the total number of replies. The posts are grouped according to activity thread type. The description of each thread is also presented. These figures only involve the first half of 2009, which is the period of January 1 to June 30, 2009.

Discussions in *Timog Online* extend to a number of topics, which generate an atmosphere of unruffled and/or engaging debate. As observed, topics on different religious beliefs, truth claims and/or Biblical subscriptions are discussed in a composed manner. This could be attributed to the nature of topics wherein believers consider religious rituals and practices as gospel truths. As most of these are passed on from one generation to another, some would question the validity of such practices. Still, most of the users deem such as accepted facts based on faith.

Among the types of threads, Bible-related discussion which has received 35.25% (1561 replies) and Christianity debate 29.74% (1317 replies) have taken most of the attention among members. It is therefore imperative to highlight that members of the forum come from different Christian denominations, though the majority are practicing Catholics. Differences in interpretation and signification of sacred texts have arisen in various debates and discussions.

The Reflection thread ranked third, with 15.31% (678 replies). Posts herein are those concerned with

Table 1: List of Activity Postings and Frequency (January 1–June 30, 2009)

Threads	Description	No. of Replies	Percentage
Bible-related discussion	Verse posts, games, trivia and sharing	1561	35.35 %
Christianity debate	Discussions on facts of the bible, theories of creation, debates of musings of theologians, philosophers and social scientists, faith polls	1317	29.74 %
Reflection	Inspirational thoughts, spiritual journeys, passion of Christ, testimonies with God	678	15.31 %
Inspiration	Collection of inspirational stories, re-postings of parables and beatitudes	336	7.7 %
Prayer requests	Prayers directly addressed to God	289	6.51 %
Christian Entertainment devotion	Uploads and downloads of videos and music of worship, Gospel songs and others	240	5.40 %
Gospel reference	Daily Gospel posts and Bible diaries	5	.11 %
TOTAL		4426	100 %

inspirational thoughts, spiritual journeys, passion of the Christ, and testimonies of encounters with God. The replies of member-posters are mostly confirmations and positive validations about their own similar experiences resulting in an increase in faith and religious beliefs.

The thread that follows is ‘Inspiration’ at 7.7% (336 replies). It includes a collection of inspirational stories and re-posting of parables and beatitudes, which members tirelessly retell. Meanwhile, posted prayers and petitions directly addressed to God have received 6.51% (289 replies). Members believe that posting their prayers is a way of making them heard and possibly granting their prayers in the near future. Prayer requests range from petitions for good health and safety of their families, and graces and blessings received.

The bottom two in the ranking are threads on Christian Entertainment devotion, at 5.40% (240 replies) and Gospel References at .11% (5 replies). Their low rankings do not imply that members do not appreciate videos and music of worship, nor hear the Daily Gospel. Rather, these acts of faith are deemed to be private and it is incumbent on the individual to manifest his/her devotion.

The thread on ‘prayer request’ is the most active, earning the most number of views (8, 201). In this thread, participants post their prayers of praise and thanks while others pray for specific requests.

Themes

This paper aims to determine the types of religious messages communicated in *Timog Online*’s forum. It has found that bible-related discussions on verse posts, games, trivia, and sharing have been the most common type of religious messages in the posted threads. With 1561 posts from January to June 2009, this thread became a daily refuge for most online users of *Timog Online*.

Filipinos leave their country with determination and inspiration, but arrive in Japan a little diffident and vulnerable. To conquer their fears, they turn to fellow Filipinos for friendship. The camaraderie forged, in

turn, helps them enrich their faith in God and practice religiosity. Also, it provides them the courage and strength to continue their quest for economic contentment. Most of them really do not intend to stay long in the host country but because of financial gains they stay, and linger until they realize that they are too old already to work.

During the initial stages of adjustment that involve confusion, culture shock, and desperation, they recognize the need for spiritual sustenance and support, and the requisite for guidance and direction. Questions, difficulties, and troubles about life that fellow migrants could not give answers and solutions to, they, then, turn to God, the omniscient of all. They turn to *Timog Online* for “Daily of Bible Verses and Scriptures”, which subsequently provides inspiration and optimism among Filipino migrants in Japan. The migrants feel that they can reach God through the Internet.

One participant, *Tata*, quoted Col. 3, 17: 23 “Whatever you do in word or in work do all in the name of our Lord Jesus. Whatever you do, work at it with your whole soul, doing it for the Lord rather than for men, because you know you will receive the inheritance from HIM as your reward.”

Another participant, *Timbog*, on the other hand, exalts God’s great power when he said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God (Mark 10: 27).”

These passages and Bible verses give online users reasons for being and the opportunity to rethink about their lives. Being away from their families, especially during the period of adjustment, leaves them weak and helpless. They turn to God and His words to gain the strength as well as the wisdom in order to lead their lives with purpose, direction, and meaning.

Christian debate also figures in *Timog Online* forum. This thread features discussions on the facts of the Bible, theories on creation, debates on musings of theologians, philosophers, social scientists, and faith polls. These debates instigated from different interpretations of the Bible, which can be traced to the fact that members of *Timog Online* belong to different Christian denominations. One of the controversial debates in the forum is that of “*Image of Saints: Forbidden*” thread (Figer and Ynion, 2010). Even the title is catchy enough to initiate members to reply. Recall that other Christian denominations have questioned Catholic’s devotion to altars and sculptures of saints, claiming it as a form of idolatry. A participant, *Living Image*, commenced the thread on April 2, 2009, soliciting ideas and opinions on whether images of saints should be forbidden or acceptable. *Living Image* then defined “image” to set the limits of the intended debate. *Living Image* said:

An Image is any physical, mental or spiritual representation or reflection of any person, place, thing or event.

Can we say or judge absolutely that an Image is an idol?

Definitely not. . . why?

An IDOL (eidolon in Greek) is primarily a phantom, a mirage in the mind, or an idea, fancy or value.

The notion IDOL is a conceptual value existing only in the mind. It is an exaggerated value attributed to any person, place, thing of event whether physical, mental or spiritual. Any real or imaginary thing need not constitute an IDOL. The very THING or IMAGE itself is not necessarily an IDOL.

It is the judgment in the mind that makes a thing an IDOL. . .

Another online user, *Dax*, immediately replied to the thread and argued that:

Not all images are idols, but all idols are images. In other words, an idol is a subset of an image.

To use your definition above, and to go back to the thread title “Imahen ng mga Santo”, is an “imahen” a mental representation? Or a spiritual one? Pareho hindi, because these exist physically. Hence, idols are physical-type images, therefore God says these should not be made for worship.

Living Image was swift to reply:

Well, no problem with idols being an image. . . . Again: To consider any being an idol is to give an exaggerated and excessive subjective value on the particular being making it a “realization” or “embodiment” of some ideal. hope you got the point

Can you give a sample of spiritual image. . .let’s see if you can defend your position that an image though physical can never be a spiritual image. . .

One participant, *Naachan*, then, intercepted, to serve as the moderator of the two and set another point for discussion. He said:

Perhaps the question should be changed. Is the Catholic use of religious imagery invalid?

There is no doubt that the participants have a wide range of information about the issue at hand, as manifested by their arguments. They have exhibited correct excerpts and provided references to strengthen their stand. It was also observed that participants were critical, at the same time subtly cynical, in considering and evaluating what does and does not correspond to their beliefs and concepts as far as religious visual piety is concerned.

The author, in this case, witnessed a typical debate setting where the members of both opposing sides defend their sides by presenting evidence and attestations in favor of what they believe in. At the end of the debate, both parties felt victorious by being able to defend their side. Even though the issue was not resolved, they were able to earn respect for their varying opinions and beliefs. Out from this debate, one can gather that faith is a subjective experience and cannot be waived by any attack on the Church, its teachings or its practices.

Reflection (such as inspirational thoughts, spiritual journeys, passion of Christ, testimonies with God) and Inspiration (such as collection of inspirational stories, re-postings of parables and beatitudes) themes also make up a sizable number of messages in ‘Religious & Inspiration’ category. In the case of *Bro. James*, who has painstakingly posted his 40-day spiritual journey with the Lord, his first message to this thread was an appeal to all his brothers and sisters in Christ to join him in his 40 days of spiritual journey. He believes this will help Christians discover life’s most important question: “What on earth am I here for?” He hopes that by the end of the journey, they will know God’s purpose for them as well as understand the big picture – how all the pieces of their lives fit together. He reasons that going online is better since it gives him the opportunity to share his experiences and realizations with many; likewise the interactive aspect of Internet provides participants the easy facilitation for discussion and sharing of ideas. He further believes that “real spiritual growth is never an isolated, individual pursuit. Maturity is produced through relationships and community.”

It is interesting to note that some online users partake in this spiritual journey of *Bro. James*. They made it a daily appointment in their schedule to check the postings and consequently take time off to reflect on the passages as well as ponder on the implications of these to their own lives.

This kind of spiritual journey online could be equated to Helland’s (2007) findings on the Jewish and Hindu virtual pilgrimages. Though anthropologists would discredit an online journey towards spiritual fulfillment since they consider a pilgrimage an actual, physical travelling to the “real” sacred site, some scholars (Helland, 2007; Macwilliams, 2004; Morinis, 1992), argue that pilgrimages are undertakings of the mind rather than the body; hence, “metaphorical” pilgrimages are as religiously powerful and consequential to believers as actual ones. To a certain extent, these pilgrimages depict and represent the relation between their online and offline ties vis-à-vis their religious way of life. Correspondingly, virtual pilgrimages are significant ways or forms of being spiritual in a very modernized world.

Posts of inspiration, furthermore, abound as online users take advantage of video clips from YouTube to achieve an impact on online members as well as on visitors of the site. Incorporated with very inspiring songs and heartwarming images, these video clips capture the sensibilities of most online users. An online user, *Adechan*, describes this as: “so touching and really inspiring!”

A participant, *Bond*, who started this thread, deems that despite Filipinos challenging situation, either in the homeland or host society, “many Filipinos are naturally inspiring. They live their lives and do noble things for the betterment of others especially the afflicted.” He compares himself to a candle: “You don’t light a candle and hide it under your bed. Instead you place it in the open so that others will see light.” He hopes that by presenting inspiring and heartwarming video clips, he could be the candle that shines light to others.

One of the most active threads in ‘Religion & Inspiration’ theme is the prayer request. While there were only 289 replies, the thread brings in the largest number of views (8, 201) among participants and visitors of the site. This could be attributed to Filipinos’ natural compassion for fellow Filipinos. They do not have anybody to turn to except their “kababayan” (co-Filipino) whom they consider as their family away from home. The connection and close attachment to racial ties is very much evident and manifested among migrants abroad (Ignacio, 2005).

Prayer requests range from asking safety of loved ones back home to giving thanks for graces and blessings that they have received from the Great Heavens above. As an online user, *Pilipinas*, reveals in his/her prayer, “Dear Lord, Thank you for all your blessings and forgive me for all my misgivings. Enlighten our leaders, that they will always think of PEACE and RESPECT others’ belief (sic) and ideals. I lift up to you all my love (sic) ones and please protect them at all times. I love you. Amen.”

Pilipinas’ prayer is a typical bedtime prayer where the person mentions thanksgiving and petitions for his/her sins, thinks of a specific request to be granted, and prays for the whole family.

Filipinos are known to be godly (Agoncillo, 1990). This Filipino value denotes the religious characteristic of the people. They firmly believe in the supernatural and all kinds of spirit dwelling in persons, places or things. “*Bahala na ang Diyos*” (God will take care) or “*Nasa Diyos ang awa*” (It’s up to God’s mercy) depicts Filipinos strong faith in God, who will alleviate all the sufferings in this world.

The author supposes that these prayer requests provide levels of participation from *Timog Online’s* users. This reception of information has incorporated the activity of prayer (Young, 2004). Unlike before when websites were solely concerned with providing and disseminating information to users, websites recently have become an interactive venue for religious practices and activities. It can be noted then that websites that were fundamentally a one-way flow of information have now become a venue for a reciprocal flow of information. There is now interactivity among members of the online group.

Because Japan is more or less three hours and thirty minutes away from the Philippines via airplane, some migrants go home to visit their families and friends once or twice a year. Most of the prayer requests dwell on this aspect. As a participant, *Quinx75*, yearns, “Good night God, make me safe bukas sa flight ko papuntang Pinas [tomorrow on my flight to Philippines]. Maging maayos po sana ang lahat until makabalik ako dito together with my daughter [Hope everything goes well until I get back here with my daughter]. For all the tears and disappointments, at sa lahat po ng nararamdaman ko everyday [and to all that I feel everyday]. SALAMAT po. I LOVE YOU po.; -)”.

Other prayers implore the healing of the sick. Considering that they are far from their loved ones and their physical presence is not possible, hence, aside from providing emotional and financial support to the family, a migrant will call upon his/her fellow users online to pray for his/her beloved or significant person(s). Just as in the case of an online user, *Jihan*, whose sister was diagnosed with acute leukemia, she contemplates:

Dear Heavenly Father,

I humbly ask you to please lay your powerful hands on my sister who is suffering from acute leukemia. Please give us strength in facing this ordeal. Without you, we are nothing. . I entrust all our sufferings to you. . I thank you for sending us instruments to let us feel that despite this great trial You are with us.

Given the nature of *Timog Online* as an interactive site and in view of Filipinos' natural compassion for fellow Filipinos, a participant, *Clovergirl*, responds to this plea by reposting the message of *Jihan* and replying: "Dear God, Thank you for all the blessings you are always giving us! Please guide us and please heal those who are sick. Thank you!" Accordingly, this will give *Jihan* the feeling that she is not alone in her prayer and that other people are also praying for her sister. This kind of gesture brings to the fore the Internet's potential for a collective sense of action between users online despite a lack of bloodline relationships.

Filipino Migrants' Social Capital

As Waldinger and Lichter (2003) assert, migrants foster social capital through the social networks that offer crucial and vital information and resources in both the homeland and host society. Hence, this paper raises a further question, how is *Timog Online* used and appropriated to construct and cultivate Filipino migrants' social capital?

Within the 'Religion & Inspiration' category, instances of migrant-support were found. This support includes ways of giving hope and inspiration to Filipino migrants as they confront the daily grind of life in Japan. Social capital, then, is articulated in the interactions and social exchanges, and networks between and among persons of *Timog Online*, which is within the bounds of faith and religious messages. Religious communities, in particular, tend to be correlated with a fairly high reserve of social capital (Park & Smith, 2000).

Bible verses and passages that expressed understanding or empathy also highlighted the idea of "community". As one participant puts it:

[I]t is Gods (sic) plan to save us. Napakasarap mabuhay na may kilala akong Diyos na totoo. Living in [j]apan proved me that [c]hristianity is our life. Hindi na maikakaila na sila man din ay nagiging Christiano na. Kung nagmamatigas ang puso pa ng marami, ito ay lalong ipaparamdam sa kanila ng Diyos hanggang sa matutunan nilang kilalanin ang Diyos.

(This is God's plan to save us. It feels great that I know a real God. Living in Japan proved to me that Christianity is our life. It cannot be denied that even they (the Japanese) have become Christians. If one resists, God will show them the way to faith.)

This comment, as well as others, evidently illustrates a sense of community, not only among *Timog Online* users, but also among all migrants who are trying to provide for themselves and their families back home (Figer & Ynion, 2010). A certain kind of unspoken understanding among members manifests camaraderie and solidarity in them. Hence, there is an easy facilitation of fellowship among online community members in the religious rituals and practices thread.

Putnam (2000)'s assertion that the advent of new media and information highways will instigate a drop in civic life through the displacement of associational activities, the messages posted on *Timog Online*, however, prove otherwise. These messages suggest that the Internet can aid in fostering and cultivating social capital by promoting spiritual support and inspiration to Filipino migrants.

In view of this, *Timog Online* is an important means to quench the thirst for spiritual needs and attention and at the same time to maximize the power of new technology to acquire a wide array of spiritual benefits – educational, ritual, inspiration and support, interactive communication and communion with the sacred (Macwilliams, 2004). These migrant networks, like *Timog Online*, that connect migrants, old and new, friends and family who are in Japan and those left behind make possible the utilization of Filipino

migrants' social capital.

Discussion

This paper reveals that the Filipino diaspora in Japan utilizes and appropriates the Internet as a means to (re) create and maintain their religious identity. In the host society where one has difficulty of adjusting and adapting to the new mores and lifestyles, migrants make use of the Internet as a venue for communication and interaction. As religiosity is a genuine part of the Filipino psyche, the Internet becomes the new medium for religious expressions, rituals, and practices. These sets of connections and networks built upon in *Timog Online* bring to the fore the concept of Filipino migrants' social capital. The author believes that through Internet use and appropriation, the sense of community building and engagement is fostered and developed. Hence, this paper yields insights into the importance of religiosity amongst Filipinos abroad, the Internet's potential for change in their migratory life, and the development of social capital.

This paper also explored how the Internet is now being utilized as a potent apparatus to allow people to link up and connect with activities that were not really possible before. This finding relates to Helland's (2007) study on virtual connections with sacred homelands. He argues that religious beliefs and practices of diasporic peoples were motivating factors for developing Usenet groups. Participation, involvement, and association can be concrete and tangible despite participants being in different geographical locations. For this reason, the Internet provides the opportunity to reduce and wither space, and subsequently fashions a sense of belongingness, intimacy, and connectedness with the homeland.

Filipino migrants' interface with the Internet and the formation of an online community are indeed steps forward in building kinship and a cooperative spirit among them. The community fostered by religiosity online, and the Internet's capacity for interactivity and communication profoundly influence and impact change for the better, and ultimately direct the development of Filipino migrants' social capital.

Conclusion

This paper provides insights on the intersection of the Filipino diaspora in Japan, the Internet, and social capital. In particular, it delves into the online religiosity of Filipino migrants in Japan. The exchange and interaction between and among members of the online community, *Timog Online*, on religiosity and spirituality confirm and configure the pervasive practice of online religion. Having been instilled Christianity by Spaniards during their colonization era, Filipinos acknowledged religiosity as a fundamental part of their lives – whether they are in the confines of the homeland or abroad. The online Filipino migrants are not self-confessed fanatics of Christianity but they recognized the importance of their religion in their survival from displacement. *Timog Online* facilitated their interaction as they engaged in discussions and discourses about religious ideas, practices, and rituals.

It should be noted that in this study, the messages analyzed only represent a very small percentage of all the messages posted on *Timog Online*'s 'Religion & Inspiration' forum. The author believes that an extensive and exhaustive exploration of *Timog Online*'s postings would optimistically describe the online religious behavior of Filipino migrant users in Japan and ultimately will help in providing insights and strategies to benefit the use of computer-mediated communication. *Timog Online*' forums are undoubtedly creating a space for dialogue and exchange. It is hoped that through these exchanges, migration processes at both the individual and community levels can bring the change for the better.

Filipinos, offline or online, in homeland or host society, recognized the indelibility of religiosity in their culture. The resource and information sharing, religious and inspirational, and support messages manifested on *Timog Online* are evidences that migrant networks are important sources of social capital.

And since religiosity and spirituality are intrinsic to Filipinos, these exchanges of faith messages are significant strands in the fabric of social relations that can influence migration, mobilization, and eventually configure enablement among Filipino migrants.

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