

# The Proof of Being Pinoy: How the Filipino Identity is Constructed and Supported on Facebook Groups.



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## **Abstract**

This thesis will focus on how social network sites (SNSs) can act as a platform where community identity is both created and supported through its affordances and where specific cultural practices occur. To do this, I will be directing my attention towards one community on the social media platform Facebook which has a particularly important presence both internationally and in the online world, the Filipino community. In doing so, I am to try to understand the use of SNSs as a platform for identity construction because I want to know how users employ the site's features to reaffirm their identity concerning a specific community in order to help my reader understand that the cultural practices that surround the creation of identity may differ from that in the offline world due to the ubiquitous nature of new media. The Filipino community attempts to make sense of their cultural identities on a platform that helps connect them, especially due to their heavy migratory tendencies.

**Key words:** Social Network Sites (SNSs); Identity; Community; Interactions; Filipinos; Migrants

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## Introduction

In the summer of 2020, a bar in Washington D.C. named 'Barkada' received much backlash from Filipino-American users on Facebook. Owned by four white men, the name 'Barkada' was aptly named after the Tagalog word *barkada* which refers to a close-knit group of friends. Other than the name, the bar had no other relations to Philippine culture such as a lack of Filipino dishes and beverages on the menu. Upon discovering this, netizens took to social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, claiming that this was just another instance of cultural appropriation and white privilege (Don Tagala, 2020). However, this criticism was soon met with fierce backlash when other members of the Filipino community, be it within the Philippines or an Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW), chastised other users for being 'overly sensitive' and subsequently creating mountains out of molehills. Indeed, some users even celebrated the international recognition of their language while others deemed it necessary to remind the Internet that the word *barkada* itself was not Filipino but Spanish in origin (Anne Acuna, 2020). What emerged instead was the clear delimitation between what it meant to be Filipino and what it meant to be an American-born Filipino, the former claiming that the latter was speaking on behalf of a culture that they had not been completely immersed in. Consequently, this debate brought into question the discussion of what makes someone Filipino and, more precisely, what makes someone Filipino on the Internet.

Filipino users, whether they live in the Philippines or not, are a particularly interesting subject when it comes to their position within a mediated landscape. What sets the Philippines and Filipinos apart is how social media has seeped into all corners of life by connecting users from a variety of social backgrounds (Antonio Contreras, 2020). According to a report published by the Pew Research Centre on Internet use around the world in 2020, 70% of the Philippine population are reported to use the Internet or at least own a smartphone, with 66% indicating that they use social media. This does not take into account the amount of Overseas Filipino users, with approximately 2.2 million Filipinos outside of the Philippines (Philippine Statistics Authorities, 2020). With such a high number of Filipino users present on the Internet, the preservation of the Filipino self and maintaining connections with their heritage on social media is important (Emily Ignacio, 2005).

As illustrated through my previous example of Filipino versus Filipino-American backlash, the construction of a Filipino identity or identities and what it means to be Filipino has become important within the mediated field. To analyse this, I would like to focus on the platform that Filipinos dedicate the majority of their Internet access to: Facebook (Martha Jean Sanchez, 2020). Facebook's affordances allow its users to shape not only their own identity but that of a collective one through groups or pages. It is based on Facebook's relevance not only concerning Filipino users but on a global scale that I will attempt to answer the question of how is the

construction of a Filipino identity both created and maintained through the features on the social media platform Facebook and related mediated practices? To answer this overarching inquiry, I have developed four sub-questions. The first deals with in what ways are Facebook's affordances being appropriated by its Filipino users to develop online Filipino identities? Furthermore, in analysing Filipino interactions on Facebook, this thesis will also attempt to explore and uncover symbols present on Facebook as a social media platform and how these symbols are associated with what it means to be Filipino. Addressing the Philippines's status as a post-colonial country, I would also like to complicate esteemed anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's notion of the homogenisation of culture by questioning how the construction of identities on online platforms instead diversifies Philippine culture. Finally, much like the standards expressed concerning the 'Barkada' incident, are there any biases or generalisations in the construction of the Filipino identity on Facebook? In doing so, this thesis will be guided through the theoretical lenses of George Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism (Charles Quist-Adade, 2018) as well as understanding the relevance of new media in everyday life (Martin Lister, 2009) and acknowledging the legacies of colonialism on Philippine identities.

## **1. Literature Review**

### **1.a. Social Media and Identity Creation**

While this thesis focuses primarily on the construction of cultural identity on social media, it is important to take a step back and first understand the implications of the term 'social media' and how identity can be performed on and supported by these sites.

The meaning behind social network sites (SNSs) has seen a constant state of reconstruction due to the social and technical landscapes that evolve alongside it. These shifts in definitions can best be described through danah m. boyd and Nicole B. Ellison's (2013) alterations from their 2007 descriptions of SNSs. They distinguish between two types of early SNSs, profile-centric and media-centric, arguing that early profiles remained relatively stagnant consisting of media texts chosen by the user and only updating when the user sees fit to do so. Over time, as SNSs began to develop, new features were added to facilitate updating one's profile such as Facebook's status updates. Profiles have then seen a shift from self-representation into self-expression through the creation of online content by the user, other users, or online content generators, thus becoming more engaging. The ability to verify a user as a contact and create a list consisting of these contacts is a fundamental element of SNSs. In the early stages of SNSs, 'Friends' used to be reciprocal between each user. As SNSs evolved, this relationship was no longer considered uniquely reciprocal and instead allowed for unidirectional relationships where users may follow a single content creator without reciprocation. Furthermore, being 'Friends' with someone online no longer meant being friends with them offline but rather represented a variety of different contexts. SNSs decontextualise user relationships as individuals can connect with family and friends but also use them for professional or religious circles. Finally, SNSs have seen a shift when it comes to viewing and traversing connections. Previously, the ability to pass through different users' profiles allowed users to find contacts and create relationships as well as reconnecting with others. As SNSs focus less on profiles but more on media streams, traversing these connections has lost its importance. Instead, newer technologies, such as algorithms, have replaced human activity when it comes to passing over profiles. Consequently, there are new ways of traversing through these SNSs with a multitude of different links embedded within content such as the use of hashtags ('#') on Twitter.

Having uncovered a variety of ways that SNSs have evolved from 2007 as well as recognising that some elements remain the same, boyd and Ellison are then able to formulate a more fitting definition:

“A social network site is a networked communication platform in which participants 1) Have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-level data 2) Can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others 3) Can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site.” (boyd and Ellison, 2013, p. 158).

Now that an established definition of what SNSs entail, now the question of identity construction on social media remains at the forefront of this analysis. In her book exploring the relationship between identity and Facebook, Mariza Georgalou (2017) begins by exploring the concept of identity. To put it briefly, identity is who and what you are. The constructionist definition, according to Georgalou, argues that identity is socially constructed, and formed based on people's beliefs and values which are influenced by their historical, social, and cultural contexts and the interactions individuals may have with others. Georgalou distinguishes two types of identities: social identity and personal/individual identity. Social identity refers to the individual identification of a person within a group and can be categorised into a master identity (something that we are born with or inherit that we generally have no choice in) or an interactional identity (associated with early socialisation). Personal/individual identity, on the other hand, is about an individual's personality, character and attitude which is open-ended and becomes a life-long project influenced by a plethora of different discourses and practices. These two types of social identity are not independent of one another: when individuals interact, their individual identity influences their social identity and vice versa, allowing them to perform within a variety of social situations.

When referring to the construction of identities on online spaces, Georgalou acknowledges the tensions that exist between the online and offline self, the latter often regarded as vague and untruthful due to its lack of material traits. Instead, Georgalou posits that the online self can be seen as one of many faces that the individual displays throughout their lives to handle a variety of social contexts. The question then focuses on the how, where, when, and why online identities manifest in the first place. According to Abigail de Kosnik and Keith P. Feldman (2017), because social media can make race, ethnicity, and colour invisible, users then actively choose to announce their identities in attempts to make their own experiences (whether that is communal or simply individual) heard by a general audience. Indeed, Georgalou argues that self-representation is facilitated and encouraged by the technological affordances put in place as well as by the social contexts of social network sites. She uses popular social network site Facebook as a way to exemplify this. In doing so, Georgalou categorises Facebook's features into four different types of affordances: participation; the space where users interact; personal expression; connectivity.

Both boyd & Ellison and Georgalou offer generalised insights into how researchers make sense of the surge in popularity of SNSs and the increasingly important creation of the self on these platforms. As this thesis takes into consideration the construction of not one but multiple Filipino identities, the next section will be dedicated to understanding the process of identity-construction of a large portion of the general Philippine population: Filipino migrants.

### **1.b. Media and Migration**

What makes Filipino users an interesting subject in the discussion of identity construction on the Internet also concerns where these individuals are and, above all, why maintaining this online cultural connection is so important. With such a large portion of the Philippine population participating in labour migration for reasons that deserves its own analysis, this section is dedicated to the meaningful relationship between migrants and media.

#### *The Connected Migrant*

While this thesis does not go into detail in diasporic studies, uncovering the processes behind how transnational communities and networks create and transform their identities, both consciously and subconsciously (Tsagarouniasou and Retis, 2019) will be useful, particularly within the context of media studies. The linkages between human mobility and the potential of connectivity are not contemporary events but are deeply fixed within global history and have helped chronicle migratory flows. It is, however, the ubiquitous and instantaneous nature of new media technology that, according to Radha S. Hegde (2020), migrant experiences are embedded in that link transnational populations, create local and distant networks, react to nostalgia, and track, recognize, identify, and control their presence, visibility, and movement. While migrants and their homelands or communities were once separated and confined by geographic circumstances, media devices have ruptured the relationship between space and time by providing not only migrants but users in general to be hypothetically present in two places at once. Roza Tsagarousianou and Jessica Retis (2019) posit that these technologies also provide a separate space where experiences, narratives, and memories are generated, supported, and exchanged between different users that help them relate to one another. As illustrated by Sandra Ponzanesi (2020), the ability to connect is particularly important for migrant communities as they stay in touch and maintain bonds with both the global and local. According to Ponzanesi: "Social networking sites offer a 'safe space' for participants to negotiate



their sense of self and express their hybrid identities or to demarcate what it means to be a member of their diasporas.” (Ponzanesi, 2020, p. 22). Dana Diminescu (2020) uses the term “connected migrants”, referring to migrants who own a variety of digitised devices that allow them to shift between various lifestyles and connect within digital environments. Having access to these devices, therefore grants them the ability to remain permanently present where they can be instantaneously contacted.

### *Migrant Identity*

Literature discussing migrants and media technologies often revolve around the need to maintain pre-established relationships and their homelands. For instance, Mirca Madianou (2019) has dedicated her research to the feminisation of migration and its impact on Filipina mothers leaving their children behind. Her study exemplifies the importance of communication technologies in not only the ability to connect individuals despite geographic disparities but also how the affordances of various social network sites (SNSs) can influence the type of interaction. One example of this would be that while instant messaging platforms were useful for short and direct conversations, visual platforms such as Skype were often used by mothers who wanted to teach their children how to cook or to check on whether they performed their household duties. While not necessarily relying on the existence of pre-established connections, Koen Leurs's (2015) research on the process of online identity making for Dutch-Moroccan youths demonstrates how the media allows migrants to connect despite the lack of offline relationships. Amidst the Netherlands's anti-immigration sentiments and Islamophobia, Leurs analyses how second-generation youths attempt to make sense of their identities on online spaces which are socially produced and help create how they perceive the world. What both of these texts demonstrate is that SNSs provide individuals, whether their status as a migrant is relevant or not, with opportunities to connect and contact those either from pre-established relationships in their home countries or whether that is to find other like-minded individuals that may validate a user's cultural identity within a deeply politicised world.

Redirecting this thesis's focus on Filipino identities on the Internet, Emily Ignacio (2005) has dedicated her book to understand how the evolution of technology has influenced the construction of identity, namely that of the Filipino-self. In doing so, she aims to emphasise how globalisation, colonisation and other socio-economic processes have impacted what Ignacio refers to as the “supposedly neutral and parallel world of cyberspace” (p. 5) and how this has subsequently influenced the creation of what it means to be Filipino. Ignacio focuses her research on a newsgroup on the Internet known as soc.culture.filipino where the Filipino diaspora can meet within a digitalised landscape. Because the Filipino community has an

important portion of its population abroad, Ignacio acknowledges how Overseas Filipinos attempt to remain connected with their motherland. According to Ignacio, many individuals away from their home countries find ways to learn more about their culture through different forms of media so that they may teach others about it as well. The new information flow then allows Filipino users to explore the global processes that have impacted their local history which will eventually aid Filipino communities to create their ideas of a Filipino identity. In conducting an ethnographic study on the Internet, Ignacio claims that the representation of Filipinohood online should not be taken as a generalisation of the Filipino public, given the difference in circumstances in how identity is created in both the digital and material reality. Some of the topics present within the forum were: Filipino jokes; the commodification and descriptions of Filipino women; language; Filipino history; cultural values; food and traditions; and the differences between Filipino-Americans and Filipinos in the Philippines. With the growing prominence of the Internet during the early 2000s, soc.culture.filipino allowed online Filipino users, regardless of where they lived in the world, to attempt to unite as one Filipino community all sharing the same communal identity.

## **2. Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Toolbox:**

This research primarily concerns how Filipino identities are both represented and supported on Facebook. It is for this reason that I have chosen to focus on three theoretical guidelines. First, this thesis will take a look into Martin Lister's (2009) conceptualisation of New Media and Everyday life, paying special attention to how new media and technology have become almost fundamental aspects of our day-to-day. I will also be incorporating sociologist George Mead's conception of symbolic interactionism and how the construction of these identities is not an isolated event and relies on interactions between different individuals. Lastly, I will briefly mention the relevance of postcolonialism within this research by also introducing Arjun Appadurai's (2010) notion of global cultural flows and homogenisation.

### **2.1. New Media in Everyday Life**

Within the field of Culture and Media Studies, the notion of new media in everyday life remains relevant with the growing ubiquitous nature of technology in our contemporary times. Martin Lister (2009) posits that the concept of everyday life extends to familial relationships, spaces where meaning is made and transformed, cultural practices, and daily routines. It becomes a sphere where new media are then being negotiated and played out whilst simultaneously involving discussions claiming that these media subsequently "transform day-to-day life, its spatio-temporal limits, and its power structures" (Lister, 2009, p. 239). Everyday life is then studied surrounding a multitude of notions which include it being a site where relationships and practices are situated in. Because the focus of this thesis is primarily aimed at the construction of Filipino identities online, I explicitly address Lister's conception of identity construction in new media in everyday life. With the Web becoming more accessible, the boundaries between public and private selves and spaces become blurred as users now find ways to publish information about themselves from the comforts of their homes (Lister, 2009). Through the affordances provided by social media sites, users can practice forms of self-representation and identity performances that are encouraged by media technologies, as we have previously seen in danah m. boyd and Nicole B. Ellison's (2013) text. Furthermore, media technologies are involved in identities shifting in several different ways including viewing new media as only a part of shifting identities that impact historical, economic, and cultural changes in individuals' identities. According to Lister, the terms identity and subjectivity are often interchangeable within the field of Culture and Media, as the author then argues that individuals faced with these new technologies are not autonomous agents but rather are subjected to shifting relationships with the media they consume and its technologies as well as the networks that

they participate in. Media and the way it transforms are instrumental to these shifting identities. Understanding the ways that new media have seamlessly integrated into everyday life will help best elaborate on the development of identities concerning communities on the Internet. Subsequently, to get a complete picture of this development, it is also important to understand how interactions that take place within these mediated fields can create meaning that allows users to relate to one another.

## **2.2 Symbolic Interactionism**

As this thesis also focuses on human interactions, albeit within a mediated space, using the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism seems the most appropriate. First conceptualised by George Mead, symbolic interactionism refers to the creation of meaning surrounding specific symbols through human interaction (Charles Quist-Adade, 2018). These symbols can then shape and recreate different social environments. According to Charles Quist-Adade (2018), there exist three assumptions that define this approach. First, people create and use symbols in attempts to communicate, thus making them socially and culturally constructed. Symbols, however, can be interpreted differently through thought and language. Second, individuals can interpret and understand their actions following these symbols through imitating other people. And lastly, through concepts such as the mind and the self, there is a relationship between the individual and society. The mind, as understood by Mead, is the process of designating symbols and applying them to real-world objects. Symbolic interactionism sees the development and maintenance of culture as an active process that stems from the consistent interactions between individuals. In turn, the creation of the self further relies on these interactions because people define their identities based on the thoughts and feelings of others. In the case of social media, the thoughts and feelings of others are translated through comments and posts that we must then interpret in a form of self-reflection. Using symbolic interactionism as a framework for my research would prove useful for several reasons. On one hand, understanding and analysing the usage of specific symbols often associated with a Filipino identity and the contexts and interactions in which they are created would be useful. On the other, the self concerning how individuals communicate these ideas through social media may reveal the uniqueness of social network sites in the creation of meaning.

### 3.3. Postcolonial Theory and Media Studies

Analysing the construction of Filipino identities would not be complete without taking into consideration the legacy based around its history of colonialism and imperialism. It is for this reason that this research must also blend postcolonial theory with media studies. Sandra Ponzanesi (2020) argues that postcolonial theory can broadly be understood as a “critique of imperialism and its aftermath, including the way it still impacts on global formations” and “to counter many of the emergent universal frameworks that often obscure underlying racialised, gendered, and classed processes that continue to define global hierarchies” (Ponzanesi, 2020, p. 18). Using this definition, I will be addressing the work of influential anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s (2010) concept of global cultural flows and its links to a postcolonial approach. He argues that, in the age of globalisation, the world can no longer be separated by simple binaries such as rich and poor or black and white that were imposed through colonialism. Cultures are bound to intersect, overlap and influence one another and this is done through the five dimensions of cultural flow: ethnoscape (human mobility around the world); technoscape (technologies that enable cross-border movement); financescape (the movement of money); mediascape; ideascape (the spread of ideas). I focus specifically on mediascapes, the distribution of information through mass media, such as the Internet, that consist of images that create particular perceptions of the world. Furthermore, these media allow distant cultures to stay connected whilst chronicling the narrative of these communities. With this, Appadurai discusses the homogenisation of culture. Often seen as the degradation of cultural diversity, cultural homogenisation refers particularly to Americanisation due to the diffusion of well-known Western symbols. Appadurai uses this concept by referring to the Americanisation of the Philippines, such as the popularisation of American pop songs, which he dubs as a “nation of make-believe Americans, who tolerated for so long a leading lady who played the piano while the slums of Manila expanded and decayed” (Appadurai, 2010, p. 30). As a previous Spanish colony and subsequent territory of the United States, Filipino identities remain fragile and not untouched by imperialism with elements of Americanisation found in various domains from cultural to political to economic. This thesis, despite not fundamentally adopting a postcolonial approach, will acknowledge modern Filipino identities as products of colonial legacies. Nonetheless, I argue that the process of identity construction differentiates between offline and online spheres of interaction which I will demonstrate by complicating Appadurai’s narrative of homogenisation.

In introducing these theoretical concepts, I aim to demonstrate the complexity of identity creation on the internet by combining the presence of new media and the importance of user

interactions on these platforms whilst acknowledging the Philippines's status as a postcolonial subject. I attempt to illustrate how interactions on social media and the affordances that allow it can create specific meanings associated with cultural identities, which could possibly be seen as generalisations or stereotypes, that many users from the same culture can easily relate to. However, I would also argue that social media has the power to exemplify cultural diversity, avoiding the homogenisation that Appadurai mentions may occur in postcolonial countries, due to social media's ability to connect different users who interact and share meanings and experiences. Through my analysis, I would like to demonstrate how social media, consisting of and exemplified by user interactions and Facebook's affordances, encourages both generalisations of a cultural identity that are identifiable by most who associate with Philippine culture as well as highlighting the different facets or traditions that exist within the Philippines and its people which may not be as apparent offline as it is online.

### **3. Corpus and Method**

In an attempt to understand how the Filipino identity is constructed on Facebook, I have chosen to focus my research on analysing the inner workings of Filipino Facebook groups. I focus on three main groups on Facebook: Subtle Filipino Traits, Filipino Cooking Group, and Filipinos of Amsterdam. The reason I have chosen these groups is primarily concerned with the topics and demographics of the groups in question. For instance, while Filipinos of Amsterdam exclusively refer to Filipino users who are based in the Dutch city, Subtle Filipino Traits and Filipino Cooking Group encapsulate a wider audience of Filipino users around the world. What I aim to observe within these Facebook groups is anchored in the content that they publish and the interactions that ultimately result from it. The content I hope to analyse will take place in the form of Facebook posts where users can share status updates, texts, images, videos, etc... Subsequently, I focus on user interaction that occurs exclusively online and publicly for members of each group to see, namely through the comment section of each post. I aim to analyse how Filipino identities are developed by users that are produced through group participation, whether that is posting or commenting, as well as how Facebook supports this through their affordances. To do so, select methods have been chosen which I believe to be the most efficient in gathering necessary information: online ethnography and textual analysis.

#### **3.1. Blended Ethnography and Communities Online**

To analyse how Filipino users develop and perform a plethora of Filipino identities on different Facebook groups, online ethnography is the most useful in examining online practices by and between users.

Traditional ethnography refers to the research of people within a particular setting in the hopes of understanding how social meaning can be derived from ordinary activity (David Silverman, 2014). While ethnography can be considered an umbrella term for a variety of methodologies, ethnographic approaches share fundamental roots in collecting and representing content about people's behaviours through participation and observation (Christine Hine, 2013). Online ethnography, according to Robert V. Kozinets (2010), is research based on online fieldwork of research on participant-observation that acknowledges the importance of computer-mediated communications (CMCs). It is instrumental in representing and developing various cultural and communal understandings that distinguish it from face-to-face or traditional ethnography. Moreover, online ethnography adheres to the same steps as traditional ethnography, namely research planning, entree, data collection, interpretation, ensuring ethical standards, and research representation (Kozinets, 2010, p. 61). Christine Hine (2013) discusses two distinct

views of the Internet as a culture in itself or as a cultural artefact that each deserves unique methodological approaches. As this thesis primarily deals with how Filipino identities are developed in a mediated sphere, I focus on the Internet as a cultural artefact, described as a “technology that was produced by particular people with contextually situated goals and priorities” and “it is also a technology which is shaped by the ways in which it is marketed, taught and used” (Hine, 2013, p. 9). In addition to this distinction, Kozinets differentiates between research on ‘online communities’ and ‘communities online’ with the latter referring to groups whose existence extends beyond the Internet and online interactions. Kozinets argues that research on communities online requires a blend of traditional and online ethnographic methods that take into consideration both approaches. Because the existence of Filipino communities is not limited to online spheres, it would be insufficient to conduct ‘pure’ online ethnography but instead blend the collection of face-to-face data and online behaviours. In applying a blended ethnographic approach to this research, I aim to employ participant observation of Facebook users by monitoring the mediated practices that take the shape of published posts (be it text, audio, or images) as well as the interactions in the comment section as a reaction to these practices to understand how users develop a Filipino identity on the platform. Furthermore, I would like to conduct two semi-structured face-to-face interviews with members of these Facebook groups by questioning the importance of having a community online, why they participate and what it means to maintain it (Appendix A). In regards to the ethics surrounding ethnography, it is in the interest of my participants that all individuals featured in the observation will be given pseudonyms for the sake of anonymity whilst those I have interviewed had given verbal consent to their personal information being used as well as their answers in the research. While a blended ethnographic approach will allow this research to analyse the behaviour of Filipino users of different geographic contexts, it does little in understanding the cultural significance behind post and comment. The next step of this thesis’s methodology will shed primarily focus on the content posted on these Facebook groups.

### **3.2. Textual Analysis**

Culture and cultural practices are able to manifest within certain online demographics through the creation of content that appropriate specific social media affordances. As I shall soon present in my analysis, this is illustrated by online Filipino communities in the creation of content and the subsequent development of online identities. I will be applying a textual analysis in an attempt to discern the cultural significance of various Facebook posts, ranging from text posts to published images or videos, and how they constitute to the development and maintenance of online Filipino identities. Before diving into what a textual analysis entails, it would be wise to understand what a ‘text’ is in the first place and what sort of texts this



research will be analysing. Texts act as cultural artefacts that help people make sense of their lives or as objects that meaning is then ascribed to (Bonnie S. Brennen, 2017). To put it even more simply, Alan McKee (2007) posits that we treat an object as a text whenever an interpretation of meaning is produced. Some examples of different texts include movies, television shows, books, songs, advertising posters, etc... In the case of this thesis, what I will be considering as a text will be Facebook posts that Filipino users have published on the selected Facebook groups, meaning that this thesis will attempt to analyze its textual descriptions, its visual representations, and the comment section which promotes user interactions.

According to Bonnie S. Brennen (2017), when conducting a textual analysis, meaning is evaluated when trying to understand how social realities are created through written, spoken, and visual languages because they are rich with interpretation and symbolism. Textual analysis helps in understanding subsequent links to culture as people make sense of the world around them (McKee, 2007). About what this thesis aims to uncover, a textual analysis would be the most appropriate in analysing and interpreting not only the visual or textual content of these posts, but also how these texts relate to each other in order to best discern their target audiences and the contexts in which they situate themselves in. Furthermore, because texts often represent and are influenced by a larger social context, such as its social, political, or historical backgrounds, conducting a textual analysis on the selected Filipino Facebook groups, specifically their content, will shed light on how Filipino users make sense of their lives and communicate their experiences with others. This primarily has to do with the shared interpretations of these various texts. As previously mentioned, this thesis also aims to uncover how meanings are created and shared between its users that create a sense of cultural belonging and therefore reinforce their cultural identities. I believe that a textual analysis of the various posts published within these groups will produce the most interesting results. In doing so, and after having already conducted participant observation, I was able to observe specific themes that had appeared more often than others and analysed them according to their contexts.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. Elements of a Filipino identity

Addressing both Martin Lister's (2009) as well as Mariza Georgalious's (2020) notion that identity construction on social media stems from that platform's affordances, this section is dedicated to analysing the content that circulates on Facebook's group feature. As previously mentioned, I analyse the activity that takes place in three groups: Subtle Filipino Traits; Filipinos of Amsterdam; Filipino Cooking Group. The existence of Facebook groups is already indicative of the platform's ability to foster both social and personal identities where like-minded individuals can interact within the limitations of a mediated landscape as well as exchange and relate to each other's experiences as an affordance of connectivity (Georgalious, 2020). The group Subtle Filipino Traits explicitly refers to this in their 'About' section, which describes the group's aims: "Subtle Filipino Traits is a community bringing together Pinoys from across the world. It's a place where our kababayan can celebrate their Filipino identity, whether they're in the homeland or abroad".

Participation within these groups remains relatively private. First off, users are required to have Facebook profiles in the first place, making this exclusive to individuals with access to communication technologies and infrastructures. Furthermore, all three groups require potential members to answer a series of questions before they are allowed to join. These questions generally range from why they would like to join the group and primarily consisted of whether or not the user had read the rules or if they had any sort of interest in or affiliation to Philippine culture. Essentially, these questions acted as a preliminary way to filter out those who would not be able to meaningfully contribute to the group's activity due to a lack of cultural understanding that comes without belonging or associating with that specific culture. Referring back to Mariza Georgalou's (2017) observations on the platform's affordances, these Facebook groups, along with the general News Feed, acts as an affordance of space referring to the "environment users face each time they log in to Facebook" (Georgalou, 2017, p. 17). On this note, in understanding how Filipino users can relate and understand one another in these spaces, certain themes became more apparent than others. Rather than focusing on the content that explicitly relates to the Philippines such as news or politics, I instead fixate on posts that consist primarily of pre-established meanings that community members exchange. Having observed these Facebook groups during my research as well as prior during my personal time, these themes mainly revolve around the subjects of food, the use of humour, and the notion of *kababayan*.

*Food and Tastes of Home*

The importance of food is not limited to the physical consumption and taste of it but also its significance concerning cultural backgrounds and how different cuisines reflect a variety of identities. Deborah Lupton (2005) argues that food is what helps delimit social classes, territories, cultures, genders, religions, etc... and that food and taste, while understood as biological and nutritional, are also products of the socio-cultural environment where it was created (Lupton, 2005, p. 317). Food can consciously and unconsciously evoke subjective emotions between people due to its various social relations. One example of this would be the *Madeleine de Proust* by Marcel Proust where the protagonist is transported back in time to a specific memory after taking a bite from his pastry. In the context of Filipino culture, Lisa Law (2001) focuses on the sense of sociality and nostalgia that tangible objects such as images of the Philippines but more specifically Filipino food evokes in Filipino workers based in Hong Kong. Since the majority of her participants were separated from their families, specific material items allowed them to create a sense of "home away from home". For instance, Law describes how Filipina women congregate in parks to indulge in Filipino dishes such as *adobo* or *pinakbet*, arguing that the sensorial experience of eating with their hands as well as the smells and tastes all constitute a shared nostalgia for the homeland. Although this refers to physical spaces of participation, this thesis refers specifically to these virtual spaces.

While social networking sites have yet developed the technology to transmit smell and taste, Facebook's support of visual content allows its users to post texts, images and videos of Filipino food which has the potential to relate users to each other through shared nostalgia and experiences. Upon selecting appropriate groups to analyse for this thesis, I came across a multitude of different groups dedicated solely to exchanging recipes and pictures of a variety of Filipino delicacies, such as the Filipino Cooking Group. Even groups that had no innate focus on Filipino cuisine, such as Subtle Filipino Traits and Filipinos of Amsterdam, consisted of a large number of posts and conversations that revolved around the topic of food. Focusing first on the Filipino Cooking Group, posts primarily consist of visual content like images and videos that showcase Filipino dishes. Group members publish a variety of delicacies including well-known meals such as *sinigang*, a popular sour soup, and some lesser-known or region-specific dishes. While the former tends to be recognisable through its name or visual representation, the latter often includes a text description such as a list of the ingredients. One post features *inabraw* or *dinengdeng*, a popular vegetable soup in the Ilocos region of the Philippines, with instructions on how to prepare it as well as a picture of the finished recipe. The comments of this particular post involved users sharing their experiences with the meal, for example through anecdotes about how their mothers and fathers once prepared it, or praises comparing it to similar meals more common in other regions of the Philippines. There exists a sense of community

surrounding the fact that most users know or have come across recipes or different ingredients primarily used in Philippine cuisine that help identify their cultural backgrounds. On this note, cultural and geographical backgrounds differ profoundly as many posts also include mostly Filipina women in various countries outside of the Philippines, sometimes featuring their non-Filipino husbands and families, sharing their versions of dishes in attempts at being seen and related to by others who may be in similar situations. Filipino Cooking Group acts as a platform where interactions surrounding food, previously limited to physical gatherings with friends and family, now take place in a mediated landscape as users express admiration through the comment section or ask and offer advice and information through posts. As a result, users, whether they were raised in the Philippines or born abroad, find ways to reconnect with their cultural heritage through food.

As previously mentioned, the Filipino Cooking Group features Filipino users all around the world where interactions and services primarily take place on the Internet. In the location-specific group Filipinos of Amsterdam, the boundaries between the online and offline become blurred as the construction of identity surrounding the notion of food also takes on a commercial aspect. There are a multitude of posts directly publicising the sale of Filipino food or hard-to-find ingredients in the Amsterdam area that users either share from other groups or post themselves. Users then comment on the posts to show their interest where the seller or the original poster subsequently advises them to use Facebook's private messaging feature to provide them with more detailed information. When location becomes relevant within a Facebook group, the site itself can act as a platform where migrant users can connect thus forming a digital presence for the diasporic community of that area. What selling food on this Facebook group does is promote a sense of 'home away from home' much like what Law had previously described by allowing its users to provide each other with the opportunity to reconnect with their cultural identity through food and interaction and supported by Facebook's mechanics. During a brief interview, Olivia, a twenty-one year old student studying in Amsterdam for the first time, recalled feeling excited when first joining the group: "I remember being surprised at how many Filipinos actually live in Amsterdam! Seeing this little community far away from home, bonding over comfort food, made me so happy". Referring back to what Law once again and her analogy of Filipino workers eating together at the park, despite Facebook inability to translate the flavours and touch of food, it first evokes a form of cultural nostalgia through seeing and sometimes hearing the images and videos posted and then further granting them the possibilities to taste it.

Just like for many cultures, food is an important element of Filipino culture that is not held back by the limits of social media but rather encouraged by it. Users on these various Facebook groups have found ways to reinforce their cultural identities through discussions surrounding

food by sharing images, advice, products, and experiences. Generally, food is a popular topic on Filipino-oriented groups such as Subtle Filipino Traits but unlike the previous two groups, it relies on another form of Internet practice that connects users: humour.

### *Humour and Identity Construction*

When asking one of my participants what characteristics constitute her opinion of a Filipino identity, she made a point of mentioning the importance of humour, especially when maintaining cultural links. On the subject of online identities, it would seem that humour has not lost its relevance but instead manifested into what is known as an Internet meme. Although the term was initially biological, Richard Dawkins's (2006) describes the characteristics of a successful meme: high longevity, high fecundity, and high copying fidelity. As memes take on a more media-oriented definition, its attributes remain relatively the same. According to Michele Zappavigna (2012), instead of exchanging information, internet memes and humour are primarily used as a strategy for social bonding relying on clever observations or catchy absurdities. Internet memes generally consist of inside jokes that then become shared, sometimes on a mainstream level, with other netizens. Furthermore, Zappavigna argues that participation within mediated community spaces that involve these in-jokes often illustrate an awareness of cultural trends as well as membership within the group. Lori Kido Lopez (2020) illustrates this through the popular holiday trend of #ThanksgivingClapbacks as an example of how Black Twitter and its African-American users relate to one another using humorous real-time experiences central to the African-American family tradition. According to Lopez, people discuss scenarios during a typical Thanksgiving using references which other Black users can relate to thus acting as a form of cultural marker and allowing for the display and development of both individual and collective identifications. Additionally, Lopez argues that #ThanksgivingClapbacks and its presence on Twitter act as a form of 'semi-enclave' where cultural spaces remain exclusive to the participation of Black users yet remain visible within the mainstream of Twitter's content flow. I'd like to argue that these Facebook groups further demonstrate this notion which features Filipino users instead.



Figure 1: A meme about the popular trend of Bubble Tea, combined with a popular Filipino meal, Adobo.

Focusing on the group Subtle Filipino Traits, even before scrolling through its feed, users can browse through specific topics which appear the most commonly within the page, one of which is 'Humour'. While Georgalou refers to the affordances of self-expression as users' ability to customise their own profiles, publishing humorous content on these Facebook groups also allude to the customisation of the Facebook group through posts, images, and videos to fit within the interests of the users that participate. These instances of self-expression through posting also appear in the previous section about food and the subsequent section about solidarity. After having observed activity within the group, Filipino humour tends to revolve around specific themes, mainly food (Figure 1), family, the Philippine accent or language, religion, cultural icons in the Philippines, and quirky Filipino mannerisms. I'd like to illustrate this by focusing on memes surrounding family and cultural icons.

When it comes to humour involving family, certain figures tend to appear more than others including sibling relationships, Filipina mothers, and the infamous Tita Baby. Tita Baby is a generally representative stereotype referring to Filipina Aunties, commonly described as whiney, nosy, and materialistic as she is often never seen without her Louis Vuitton bag. While not every Auntie who fits the previous description is necessarily named 'Baby', with the name being humorous on its own, by posting amusing anecdotes that mock this stereotype, users can

relate their familial experiences to a hilariously exaggerated version of reality. On posts featuring Tita Baby (Figure 2), users take to the comment sections to recount their experiences with their aunts, even going as far as to criticise Tita Baby figures as a problematic and superficial side of Philippine culture. Subsequently, as another way of relating to one another, users within the group use Facebook's tagging feature which alerts other individuals to a particular post by typing the '@' symbol followed by their names where they apply their experiences to specific situations. For instance, one user tagged another jokingly saying that their mother fits this stereotype or another arguing that they and their friend would end up becoming Tita Babys themselves, a form of self-deprecating humour. When discussing how social media personally helped him reconnect to his cultural identity, Anton, a twenty-two year old student who had been living in the Netherlands for 3 years argued that the importance of family is a core value within Filipino culture. Memes and other users being able to relate to his personal experiences often helped him reflect fondly on his childhood and time back in the Philippines, especially when he would go through bouts of homesickness.



Figure 2: A meme featuring the figure of "Tita Baby".

I would like to address the prominence of memes revolving around Filipino icons for the specific cultural context that it entails. Much like what Zappavinga describes as inside jokes on the Internet, understanding the cultural significance of these icons requires a look into the geographic conditions of users. For instance, second-generation Filipino migrants born outside of the Philippines might not understand why a specific thing, place, or person is so often talked about. This is not the case, however, for Filipino migrants who have lived or grown up in the Philippines, who can easily relate to these cultural figures. Why memes surrounding these subjects are important may differ for a variety of reasons. Focusing on memes about the Filipino

fast-food chain Jollibee, despite the restaurant having established branches outside of the Philippines, it remains relatively exclusive to the country and massively popular within Filipino culture as evident through the plethora of posts surrounding it. While they are admittedly very exaggerated, posts revolving around Jollibee often joke about how delicious the meals are, with one post involving how they would rather eat Jollibee than have to exercise (Figure 3). For migrants in countries without any access to a culturally relevant icon like Jollibee, viewing memes instils a form of nostalgic longing for the home country. One user commented: "It just isn't the same ): Jollibee inside Seafood City in Chicago doesn't taste good. It's very disappointing when you crave Jollibee and drive half an hour to Chicago to buy chicken just to have your tongue betrayed".



Figure 3: A meme about Jollibee

While many other users were able to relate to the joke, as seen in the comment section, what this meme also entailed was a shared nostalgia amongst migrants and other members of the online community who could no longer relate due to their location. Despite this, being able to understand and relate to the context behind the meme still affords users with some form of affirmation that they still identify within a community.

Filipino memes need not necessarily address popular Filipino icons to become relatable for other users as oftentimes the butt of the joke is sometimes based on mundane experiences that



occur in day-to-day Filipino life. These memes once again evoke a form of nostalgia within its users by reminding them of specific experiences that are only recognisable to Filipinos due to specific cultural signifiers. One meme describes the experience of buying something cheap at the local convenience store, otherwise known as a *sari-sari* store, and the difficult decision of choosing from a wide array of popular Filipino snacks (Figure 4). While this feeling is perhaps universal when it comes to buying anything, it is the use of the language and the particular imagery that then becomes a relatable experience to Filipinos alone.

## Pinakamahirap na desisyon



Figure 4: A meme describing the “hardest decision ever”.

Referring back to Lopez’s notion of the ‘semi-enclave’, Filipino groups act as a space where Filipinos or those affiliated with Filipino culture can participate whilst simultaneously remaining within the mainstream. Internet memes on Facebook rely on not only humour to help exchange relatable experiences with each other but also depend on the particular images and symbols that are recognisable to members of the community. While sharing and exchanging humorous experiences can certainly solidify communal identities, one element stands out within these Facebook groups and that is the important sense of fellowship.

*The Importance of Kababayan*

In Philippine culture, there exists a profound sense of community which can be summed up through the Filipino word *kababayan*. *Kababayan*, literally translating to 'fellow Filipino' or 'countryman', is an important notion especially for migrant Filipinos who rely on solidarity that is based on their shared cultural, religious, and sometimes even political backgrounds. Both of my participants expressed deep importance when it came to cultural solidarity between individuals. One participant, Anton, said "we really see every other Filipino as a friend" as he recounted an experience in his first year abroad where meeting and talking to a Filipino exam instructor was enough to make his day. Understanding what this word entails, especially when the construction of Filipino identities has been translated into a digitalised sphere, already points to reasons why groups focusing on Filipino culture exist in the first place: for users, despite their geographic limitations, to connect based on shared experiences and similar cultural backgrounds. This intense sense of community can further be illustrated through how Filipino users interact, especially in their times of need.

While the group Filipino Cooking Group consists of pictures of what someone is eating or has cooked, a meaningful portion of the group's interactions is based on both asking and receiving advice. As previously mentioned, Mirca Mardianous (2019) focuses her attention on how the feminisation of migration affects the relationships between Filipina mothers who migrate and their children who are left behind in the Philippines. She argues that these mothers still practice forms of digital child-rearing that are supported by a variety of social network sites (SNSs). This included teaching their children how to cook, clean, and generally offering forms of parental advice through video-calling platforms like Skype. These types of interactions are primarily based on a pre-established familial relationship that is maintained through social media. On Filipino Facebook groups, there need not necessarily be any form of pre-determined relationships between its users other than the fact that they all share a common cultural link. What Filipino mothers and their children do through video call is now being replicated by members of these groups through text and image posts. One user having particular difficulty with cooking writes:

"Help! What am I doing wrong here? Why is the sugar not coating my plantains? I followed instructions from a Youtube tutorial, but my BananaCue is not turning out right. All the sugar sunk on the bottom of the pan even with constant stirring..."

The user also included a 360-degree photo, one of Facebook's immersive image features, of their meal to better illustrate the processes that they followed. Other users then took to the comment section, offering their solutions to fix the mistake with one individual going into

lengthy detail about the cooking process. Additionally, other members of the group would comment with pictures and videos of their versions of the recipe, showcasing the “correct” way of preparing it. There are a myriad of other posts asking the same questions of “How do I...”, “What do I...”, and “What can I...” that do not rely on the same affordances that video-sharing platforms offer. Members of the group can help each other out based on a mutual interest but also through the cultural links that bind them together, that being food in this case. For example, a Dutch user with no affiliation with Philippine culture would have very little to contribute in posts questioning what to do with ube, otherwise known as purple yam.

While food is once again represented as a significant part of identity construction, it is important to acknowledge that, in these groups, users do not need any other reason to ask for help other than the fact that they identify with Philippine culture. This is particularly evident in both the Subtle Filipino Traits and Filipinos of Amsterdam groups where users rely on the sensibilities and compassion of their fellow members. One example stands out in the latter group with one user, a Filipina mother residing in Amsterdam, explaining her situation. She wants to bring her young child to the Netherlands but is unable to return home to the Philippines due to work and health restrictions brought on by the COVID-19 epidemic. Furthermore, she explains that her chosen airline no longer supports unattended minor services and, in making these posts, asks other members of the group if anyone would mind accompanying her child during the flight back. Although the post did not gain as much traction, for a user to rely on others with the safety of her son illustrates a profound trust within the community once again solely based on individuals’ supposed affiliation with the Philippine identity simply by being a member of this group, once again referring back to what our participant had described as every Filipino being a friend to one another.

Another example of this is in the group Subtle Filipino Traits. While scrolling through the group’s content, it would seem at first glance that the group consists primarily of meme and joke posts rather than anything explicitly serious. However, upon scrolling, I discovered posts relatively similar to my previous example. After recent waves of Asian-hate crime in the United States where a 65 year old Filipina immigrant was brutally attacked in New York (Jason Gutierrez and Mike Ives, 2020), a link to a GoFundMe page was posted on the group, inciting different users to donate to help fund her medical costs. While comments were disabled, the post tracked an outpour of support as symbolised through Facebook’s like feature which now includes the option to ‘react’ to a post. Reactions include icons symbolising love, anger, sadness, joy, and shock. Around 379 users reacted to this post with the like and love reactions as well as Facebook’s newest addition, ‘care’. At the moment, there are around 262,000 dollars raised in donations. While this is not the first instance within this analysis where users have appropriated Facebook’s affordances of connectivity through the comment sections to connect and link with

one another, as speculated by Georgalou, it is also important to note that these connections need not necessarily be explicit. The act of 'liking' and 'reacting' to posts allow the publishers to feel seen and empowered by their fellow group members. Filipinos have a particularly strong sense of solidarity when it comes to their fellow countrymen and posts like these play on their sensibilities to help fellow members of the community.

The notion of *kababayan* is a particularly important concept for Filipinos both in the Philippines and especially abroad that link them together through their shared cultural background and experiences. This is particularly evident in Facebook groups that become almost exclusive to Filipino participation once again referring to a space that Filipino users are introduced to when logging into Facebook (Georgalou, 2017). Furthermore, this form of kinship becomes even stronger when acknowledging the differences in cultures within the Philippines itself, somewhat opposing Arjun Appadurai's arguments of homogenisation. This then brings us to our next topic of discussing how Filipino identities online do not necessarily represent their post-colonial status.

#### **4.2 Complex Philippine identities**

It would be wrong to ignore the Philippines's status as a postcolonial country when discussing Filipino identities. This is particularly evident when acknowledging the prominence of the English language, with it being the second national language, and the profound Americanisation of Philippine culture due to American domination that Arjun Appadurai (2010) mentions in his discussion of global cultural flows. While the latter statement certainly remains true in the context of offline Philippine culture, such as the popularization of American TV and cinema, I'd like to complicate Appadurai's claims of the homogenisation of culture and other instances of colonial legacy, arguing that they are not as apparent in the construction of online Filipino identities as it is in the offline. When browsing through the groups in search of one example of Americanisation, I found that many posts instead relied on a purely Filipino context that did not depend on Western narratives or meaning. This is especially obvious in the content posted on the Subtle Filipino Traits group.

Once again referring to Facebook's feature of allowing its users to browse through groups according to the most popular topics, one subject most often posted in Subtle Filipino Traits is 'Culture'. What makes this topic particularly interesting is that the notion of 'culture' acts as an umbrella term that encapsulates a wide range of different subjects from light-hearted elements of Philippine culture, like one user commenting that it is within a Filipino's nature to gossip, to a more profound appreciation for a country's historical and cultural backgrounds. When browsing this topic, it was apparent that there is an explicit appreciation of Philippine culture that existed

before the introduction of Christianity and, subsequently, Spanish colonialism. These posts primarily consist of descriptions of Philippine lore and mythology and the history of pre-colonial Philippines including the languages spoken and the attire worn. Subtle Filipino Traits may be a group to help users connect with their contemporary culture and to relate to one another through their experiences, it also acts as a platform supported by Facebook's ability to share texts, videos, and images, to learn about a cultural heritage that may have been lost due to colonial influences. In one post explaining the different monsters within Philippine lore, users recount not only their childhood fears of ever encountering them but also the fact that some individuals had never heard this side of their culture in the first place. Rather than explicitly criticising the legacies left behind by both Spanish and American periods of colonialism, what these Facebook groups instead do is highlight the uniqueness of Philippine culture before colonial domination. Furthermore, there are educational posts that explain how Spanish colonialism impacts Filipino identities today such as explaining why so many Filipinos have Spanish surnames in the first place (users once again taking to the comment section to either thank the original poster for this new information or replying with an anecdote). These groups are meant for users to interact with one another through connectivity affordances but these instances of connection also act as a place to learn and to teach individuals who may not have had the opportunity to learn about their history in schools.

In contention with Appadurai's notion of the homogenisation of culture, I would like to point out that Filipino groups on Facebook have made it abundantly clear that even within the Philippines there exists a variety of different cultural backgrounds that can come together within the limitations of the mediasphere. Even with English as the primary language used to communicate within these groups, users discuss topics in a variety of different Filipino dialects such as Tagalog, Bisaya, Ilocano, etc... As previously mentioned, on the Filipino Cooking Group, a variety of different interpretations of one meal exist depending on the regional or provincial background of the user. It could differentiate by name, ingredients, or even the time or purpose it should be eaten. The group allows its users to discuss these differences in a mediated environment where individuals are often granted a relative form of anonymity other than their cultural background. While I tend to stress the importance of food in the context of Filipino identities, it is one example of the different identities that exist within this umbrella term. Another more explicit example can be found in the Subtle Filipino Groups. Because of its ability to act as a platform where a variety of users from different areas of the Philippines or around the world can congregate, due to the affordances that Georgalou has previously outlined, it is also used as a means to discuss these differences in an informative way. Users post images of iconographs explaining the diverse languages, foods, traditional attire or any other cultural differences within the Philippines to help others understand that it would be impossible to agree on one singular Philippine identity but rather various versions of it. One post, for instance,

explains the different tribes, cultures, and languages found in the Mindanao region of the Philippines where Islam is the dominant religion rather than Christianity. This once again acts as an instance of self-expression through the users' ability to post information, through images, comments, and texts, pertaining to their profiles and within the interests of the group. With geographic limitations, it would be much more difficult for users to be introduced to the various ways Philippine culture can be presented. Because these Facebook groups acknowledge that there does not necessarily exist one universal Filipino identity, it becomes easier for users to be able to relate to one another knowing that the conversation does not simply revolve around the mainstream perception of Philippine culture. Lastly, it is important to recognise that the popularity of social media sites can also be considered as a concept established by Western hegemony. This does not necessarily mean that there is a process of homogenisation going on but rather, due to the content being posted on these Facebook groups that explores different facets of Philippine culture, what Appadurai refers to instead as indigenisation (Appadurai, 2010, p. 32), where Filipino members of these Facebook groups manipulate the platform's affordances to explicitly introduce elements of their cultural identity that remain uninfluenced by Western standards.

With this, I contend that while Facebook groups do acknowledge the Philippines's status as a postcolonial country, it does so in a way that recognises the colonial legacies and the pre-colonial history that many individuals may not have known otherwise. Furthermore, Appadurai's concept of the homogenisation of culture may be more apparent within an offline discussion of Filipino identities but Facebook groups can evoke a sense of cultural heterogenization, even within the Philippines. I believe that what these Facebook groups do is provide users with a more profound idea of the rich cultural diversity that the Philippines has to offer without the need to address international pop culture.

## Conclusion

Identity construction within a mediated sphere is not simply saying who you are and what you like but rather a complex process of meaning-making and user interaction that culminates in being able to relate to one another through the exchange of identifiable experiences.

In answering the question of how Filipino identities are both created and maintained through the features on the social media platform Facebook and related mediated practices, this thesis first addresses the content that usually circulates within these three Facebook groups, namely food, humour, and the notion of *kababayan*. First off, Facebook's support of visual and textual descriptions of various Filipino dishes instead act as an instigator of user interactions that take place on the post itself through the comment section. Rather than discussing the sensorial effects of the food itself, users instead discuss the practices surrounding it such as exchanging advice as well as experiences that may evoke nostalgic memories for some users. Food then becomes the subject of choice that helps to reaffirm users' cultural identity through the shared knowledge and understanding of its importance. Furthermore, Facebook also acts as a platform where commercial practices can take place, especially when members of a specific group belong to the same diaspora. In the case of food, Filipino users can now inform one another where to purchase specific ingredients or meals in the city of Amsterdam by posting information about it, introducing them to material objects that encourage their cultural identities. Second of all, the use of humour through the form of Internet memes acts as cultural identification as it involves different variations of inside jokes that community members must interpret. The use of humour also evoked feelings of nostalgia for users, particularly those who had already left the Philippines and sought different means of reconnecting to their childhoods or family. In doing so, users were once again able to relate to each other through shared experiences and the ability to share meanings. Lastly, while there exists a strong sentiment of solidarity within Filipino culture offline, the use of SNSs only exacerbates these feelings by bridging its users together despite geographic limitations. Because this solidarity exists, understood through the notion of *kababayan*, users rely on the sensibilities and compassion of others to help support one another solely based on the fact that they are a member of the group.

As previously mentioned, to discuss the construction of Filipino identities without acknowledging its status as a postcolonial country would be incomplete and lacking the necessary cultural context. Rather than explicitly acknowledging the consequences of colonialism as postcolonial theory attempts to illustrate, users within these Facebook groups instead focus on a purely Filipino culture that revolves separately from Western domination such as educating different members on a pre-colonial Philippines or sharing stories of Philippine folklore and superstition. Furthermore, while this analysis only discusses certain

stereotypes of Filipinos, these Facebook groups further attempt to complicate the idea surrounding Philippine culture and identity by showcasing the various traditions, dishes, languages, and tribes around the country with information that may not be as easily accessible in the offline world. This complicates Arjun Appadurai's (2010) argument of homogenisation which may exist explicitly within the outside world.

In conclusion, my research demonstrates how the construction of online identities revolves around the circulation of pre-established meanings associated with specific cultural identities that have been appropriated to suit online practices and social media affordances, that being Facebook and its group feature. Furthermore, referring to Mariza Georgalou's (2017) categorisation of Facebook's affordances, this thesis demonstrates how users not only performed their cultural identities on Facebook but how this performance is only made possible through Facebook's features: participation, providing optional information about oneself as users not only create their profiles to join Facebook but also answer specific questions to participate on the group; the space they participate in being the groups themselves where content is shared and published; self-expression, in this case users publishing content that customises not only their own profiles but the groups content to fit within the general interests of its members; connectivity as seen through the group itself, the comment sections, the 'like' features, and the instant messages users may send to each other. What I believe my thesis contributes to the overall discussion of online identity construction, however, is that social media has the ability to make time and place redundant due to its growing ubiquitous nature, allowing a variety of different users to explore and introduce each other to diverse aspects of their heritage, thus complicating a culture's identity. These platforms act as a space where heterogeneity within a culture is not inhibited by geographic limitations and offline interactions but instead exemplified and celebrated by its participating users who use Facebook as a place of self-expression, allowing users to connect through shared experiences or even their differences. Therefore, Facebook demonstrates the complex process of cultural identity creation.

Certain limitations had presented themselves throughout the process of this research. Firstly, while this thesis aims to demonstrate the diverse nature of cultural identities, I have also fallen into the trap of generalisation. Because it would be impossible to analyse every group dedicated to Filipino users on Facebook, I was only able to analyse three key themes that become apparent throughout the research and even then, these were not the only topics discussed within these groups. The subject of politics, religion, and criticisms of Filipino identity and culture were also popular discussions. This thesis is in no way indicative of the construction of all Filipino identities but rather shows a portion of this process. Second off, while conducting a blended ethnography would have been ideal since Filipino communities online are not exclusive to virtual spheres, this research found that conducting interviews was far less informative than



observing the comment sections of various posts. The reason for this is that I attempted to avoid creating biases for my participants and thus their answers remained more generalised as opposed to the specific anecdotes that the comment section provided. Furthermore, a blended ethnography featuring face-to-face interactions was complicated due to restrictions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, as a Filipino myself, I believe that I am not immune to research bias during this process and while certain cultural elements may seem obvious from a personal standpoint, these reflections may not be apparent to readers who are unfamiliar with Filipino or Asian culture in general.

One thing that particularly stood out during the process of this research was the age demographic of users on Facebook. While not going into too much detail, users within these Facebook groups generally presented themselves as older than in their twenties, as illustrated through their Facebook profile pictures (which are not necessarily indicative of age), and the contents of their posts. Furthermore, during the course of my interviews, I noticed that my participants, all in their early twenties, said that their platform of choice was either TikTok, Reddit, or Instagram, rather than Facebook, instead arguing that Facebook was more popular within an older generation. There, meaning making them adapted to the processes and affordances exclusive to those apps. This can open up the question to popularity surrounding social media that becomes dependent on age demographics.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interview Questions

#### *Basic Information:*

After having asked them their name, age, and where their family is from in the Philippines.

1. Where do you live now? Other than the Philippines, how many countries have you lived in?
2. How many years has it been since you left the Philippines?
3. For what reasons did you leave the Philippines?
4. Do you currently live with or know any other Filipinos in your current country of residence?

#### *Questions about identity:*

1. In your own opinion, what are typical characteristics of Filipino culture?
  - a. What are some positive and negative stereotypes?
2. Did you experience a form of culture shock when you first arrived in your country of residence?
3. Is it important for you to retain your cultural identity?
4. If yes, what are some of the ways that you keep in touch with your culture?
  - a. If not, why?

#### *Questions about social media:*

1. Do you use any kind of social media platform?
  - a. What do you use social media for?
2. Do you use social media to keep in contact with friends and family in the Philippines?
  - a. Which platforms do you use and why those ones specifically?
3. Do you ever use Facebook? If so, what about the platform's features do you specifically use it for? (i.e. posts; groups; Messengers; pages; etc...)

#### *Questions about social media in relation to Filipino identities:*

1. In your opinion, is social media an important way for individuals to express their cultural and national identities? How? Why?
2. Have you ever used social media as a way to connect with your cultural identity?
  - a. If yes, how so?
  - b. If no, why not?
2. Are you a member of Facebook groups that relates to being Filipino? (i.e. Subtle Filipino Traits)

- a. Why did you join these groups?
  - b. What did you expect before joining these groups?
3. What are specific elements/themes that tend to come up often within group activity?
4. Do you think these Facebook groups are representative of Filipino identities?