Filipino Migrant Caregivers in Israel during COVID-19: Enhancing Communal Social Capital via Facebook

Deby Babis* **and Galia Sabar****

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has differentially affected citizens and non-citizens, both asylum seekers and migrant workers, worldwide. We explore how the Filipino caregiver migrant community in Israel used social media to cope with the unique challenges its members faced during the first months of the pandemic. Based on digital ethnography on Facebook and interviews, our findings reveal that these challenges included loss of their jobs with no government support, loss of their day off and the ability to meet other Filipino caregivers in person, limited access to information on COVID-19 relevant to Israel and potential loss of their visa after giving birth. To cope with these challenges, they utilized Facebook to (1) manage self-help philanthropic campaigns assisting the needy; (2) organize digital communal events, enabling isolated Filipino caregivers to be actively involved; (3) provide information on COVID-19 in Israel and in the Filipino community and (4) create a communal operation to send babies to the Philippines to obey regulations concerning migrant women who gave birth. While complying with strict lockdown and social distancing regulations, the Filipino caregiver community developed new modalities of conduct via social media platforms and cultivated online communal social capital, which expanded the well-established social capital that already existed in the community.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; social capital; migrant workers; Filipinos; Israel

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Introduction

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, crucial challenges have emerged worldwide alongside new developments in digital practices. Such challenges, and the use of digital technology as a coping mechanism, differ from one population to another. Migrant groups in particular have faced special challenges and have used the digital world during the pandemic in a unique way to cope with them. Based on digital ethnography on Facebook and in-depth interviews, we explore how the Filipino migrant caregiver community in Israel has used social media to cope with the challenges its members experienced during the first few months of the pandemic.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020, Israel imposed an immediate countrywide lockdown, affecting all those present in the country, citizens and non-citizens alike, including asylum seekers and international labor migrants. Among the latter were thousands of live-in Filipino caregivers who found themselves locked up with their employers in the latter's homes. Those employed as live-out domestic workers were laid off.

Aside from researching medical responses to the virus, most studies have investigated how different governments have responded to the pandemic and how individuals have coped with it. However, the price to be paid, the long-term social, psychological and emotional costs to the lives and livelihoods of millions worldwide, are still unclear. A previous study of Filipino caregivers during the lockdown documented that both individuals and community-based organizations engaged in philanthropic activities to cope with the challenges they faced (Sabar, Babis, & Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, 2021). Moreover, these activities not only helped recipients overcome their challenges, but also empowered the donors both as individuals and as part of a diasporic community.

In this study, we seek to expand our understanding of how international labor migrants coped with the pandemic by focusing on their social media activity and its implications for the accumulation and usage of communal social capital. More specifically, we look at how the use of social media by Filipino caregivers in Israel impacted and shaped the expansion of their communal social capital as a strategy for coping with the challenges of the pandemic. For the purpose of this study, we define communal social capital as the sum of the resources (actual and virtual) that people derive from specific social structures and then use to pursue their interests as individuals and as a community. As we will show, through extensive use of Facebook, the Filipino caregiver community in Israel was able to use and expand its social capital – reaching out to thousands of members in need, expressing sympathy, expanding its mutual help activities and strengthening the sense of belonging, all within lockdown restrictions. This study is therefore situated at the crossroads of three main bodies of literature: the role of migrant communality and community-based activities, including philanthropy, among international labor migrants worldwide; communal social capital; and the extensive and effective use of social media in diasporic communities.

Literature Review

Filipino Labor Migrants in Israel

Unlike the situation in most developed countries, international labor migrants began arriving in Israel only in the late 1980s, during the first Palestinian uprising. Until then, few foreign nationals worked in Israel and there were no clear policies or regulations concerning non-Jewish migrants. With the increasing violence and defensive closures brought on by the Palestinian uprising, the Israeli government licensed manpower companies to import migrants to replace the Palestinians, who until then had formed the bulk of the workforce in agriculture and construction (Raijman, 2020; Sabar, 2004). The first international labor migrants to join these two sectors came from Turkey, Romania, China and Thailand. However, once Israel opened its labor market to international labor migrants, new workers began to enter additional employment sectors. This change occurred in parallel with the implementation of a long-term care insurance program, which provides financing for long-term home care services for elderly Israelis. The launching of this program created a new sector for international labor migrants in the country. The first to arrive were Filipinos, who came to work as live-in caregivers for the elderly beginning in the mid-1990s. This migration was reinforced by the Philippine labor export policy, promulgated as a strategy to cope with a severe economic crisis that began in the 1970s. Following a formal agreement between the two countries, thousands of Filipino caregivers, mainly women, were recruited to provide live-in home care in Israel (Liebelt, 2011; Shamir, 2013).

According to Israeli policy, there are limited avenues through which non-Jewish migrants can gain residency or citizenship (Raijman, 2020; Shapira, 2018). Strict regulations concerning the rights of international labor migrants were created in an attempt to make their stay temporary and prevent their large-scale permanent migration. Hence, legal stay in the country requires a valid work visa; there is no right of family reunification, so that migrant workers cannot bring their spouses and children from their country of origin to Israel; first-degree relatives (parents, children, spouses) of international labor migrants working in Israel cannot obtain work visas; marriage between international labor migrants working in Israel is forbidden; there are strict regulations regarding marriage to Israeli citizens; and migrant workers have limited access to state-sponsored socioeconomic benefits.[1]

[1] While Israel's immigration policy does not offer international labor migrants a path to citizenship or permanent residency, Filipinos can obtain citizenship or residency by marrying an Israeli citizen. In addition, unprecedented ad hoc resolutions in 2005 and 2010 granted permanent residence to migrant workers' children and their parents living in Israel (Babis, Lifszyc-Friedlander & Sabar, 2018).

Moreover, citizenship is not granted to children born in Israel to international labor migrants, and there are special restrictions for migrant workers who give birth. Although in 2011, following the petition of human rights organizations (Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, 2018), Israel's High Court repealed a policy enforced since October 2004 that forbade a pregnant migrant worker from renewing her work visa unless she sent her newborn to her homeland, some restrictions still apply. Pregnant labor migrants are allowed to give birth during the first 63 months of their stay in Israel and to remain in the country with the child – provided their employers agree – until their work visa expires.[2] Those who give birth after completing 63 months of work in Israel must leave the country with the child after her maternity leave ends. She can return to work in Israel with the same employer, but without the child (Ministry of Interior, 2018). Refusal to obey these regulations can cost them their visa or lead to deportation.

The Israel Central Bureau of Statistics estimates that, as of March 2020, there were about 118,000 international labor migrants in Israel, of whom 100,000 held valid work visas, while the stay of the remainder was illegal (Israel Population and Immigration Authority, 2020). The local Filipino community numbers around 25,000 members, ages 24–60 (Israel Population and Immigration Authority, 2020), 86% of whom are women. Approximately 17,000 have work visas, while the rest – some of whom have been working in Israel for dozens of years – are in the country illegally and under constant threat of deportation. Most Filipinos in Israel live with their employers in private homes; some live with them in assisted living complexes and others work as live-out domestic workers and reside in collective apartments with numerous roommates.[3] In all three groups, some hold valid visas while others (mainly live-out domestics) are undocumented. As of 2020, the monthly salary of Filipino caregivers is about $1,500–$2,000 USD. As most are the main breadwinners in their families, they send most of their income to their families back home.

As live-in caregivers, Filipinos are required to work round the clock, six days a week, with one day off. They sleep in the employer's residence, in a private room, the living room or the same room as the care recipient, having little privacy (Ayalon & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2010; Liebelt, 2011; Mazuz, 2013). Owing to long work hours, boredom, loneliness and the monotony of days spent with the elderly recipient, live-in caregivers often feel alientated and depressed (Ayalon, 2012; Mazuz, 2013).

[2] Officially, international labor migrants are allowed to work only as caregivers for 63 months. Caregivers' work visas may be extended until the death of their employer, after which their visa expires and they are required to leave the country. In some cases, they can apply for a special visa.

[3] Live-in caregivers rent a room or bed in these collective apartments for their days off.

The Filipino Community in Israel

Over the years, individual Filipinos who came to Israel created a lively and supportive community by themselves and for themselves (Kama, 2008; Liebelt, 2011). Social networks based mainly on kinship and friendship have been the basis of this large, diverse, active community, which has helped its members alleviating the hardships of living as foreign caregivers within a restrictive state-orchestrated regulatory system. At the core of the community are local voluntary social, welfare, and savings and loans (*Paluwagan*) groups, as well as cultural, religious and economic enterprises and organizations. In addition, the community magazine, *Manila-Tel Aviv*, offers guidance on employment and housing, as well as vital information on Israeli rules, regulations and lifestyles (Kama, 2008). Thousands of individuals refer to themselves as belonging to this "Filipino community" in Israel, as well as to about 60 organizations established by Filipinos in the country, offering religious services and socioeconomic assistance (Babis, Zychlinski & Kagan, 2021; Liebelt, 2011). In addition, there are two umbrella organizations: the Federation of Filipino Communities in Israel (FFCI)[4] and the National Alliance of Filipino Communities (NAFILCO). Migrants who choose to take part in community events and activities – donating money, offering talent, helping others and being helped – strengthen the community, expanding its social capital (Babis, 2021a).

Filipinos work all over Israel, but their community hub is the Central Bus Station in downtown Tel Aviv, where many shops offer products and services to the Filipino community. On their day off, when they leave their employer's residence and stay in small rented apartments shared with 8–15 other Filipinos, this area looks like "little Manila" (Liebelt, 2011).

Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, the Filipino community was very active, with diverse activities held throughout Israel. Most community events took place on the workers' day off over weekends (Liebelt, 2011) and included church gatherings, sports leagues, day trips around the country, parties and very popular beauty contests (Babis, 2021a). One major component of the community's activities is fundraising or communal philanthropy, the beneficiaries being members of the community in Israel, as well as individuals or communities back home (Babis et al., 2021). Until March 2020, all these activities were carried out face-to-face at community gatherings. In between the encounters and activities on their days off, Filipino caregivers maintain their communal life via social media – mainly Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. These digital tools have become central platforms for community interaction and organization (Babis, 2021b; Golan & Babis, 2019a; 2019b).

[4] The FFCI was established in 2002 following the efforts of the Philippine Embassy to improve its communication with the many local Filipino organizations. The Embassy has no control over this or other organizations, although Embassy personnel are invited to various events and celebrations organized by the community.

Digital Communication and Labor Migration

The digital diaspora, meaning the online involvement of groups of immigrants, refugees and international labor migrants, has recently become a focus of analysis (Laguerre, 2010; Nancheva, 2021; Witteborn, 2019). Research on international labor migrants and technology has mainly examined the Internet as a provider of one-to-one communication tools, exploring how transnational families utilize this medium to interact with one another (Acedera & Yeoh, 2018; Cabalquinto, 2018; Cabanes & Acedera, 2012; Chib, Malik, Aricat & Kadir, 2014; Longhurst, 2013; Madianaou & Miller, 2013). Other studies have focused on the creation of digital communities in the host country to promote social and political causes (Babis, 2021b; Golan & Babis, 2019a; Le Duc, 2016; Wijaya, Watson & Bruce, 2018). The study of such digital diasporas stresses that they are made up of three components: migrants, access to technology and online networks between users (Dubinsky, 2020). These components enable online social networks to recreate identities, share opportunities, preserve their culture and influence home and host country policies (Oiarzabal & Reips, 2012). However, as Dubinsky (2020) argues, most of these activities and their outcomes are usually based on pre-existing networks, physical arenas of activism and other bases of communality.

To date, only a few studies have focused on the involvement of international labor migrants on Facebook. One such study found that the prevalent use of this platform by Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand helped build a community by connecting family, friends and faith groups and by providing community support in times of crisis (Le Duc, 2016). Research on Indonesian migrant workers found that their online community on Facebook empowered them at both the individual and community levels by enhancing their psychological wellbeing and increasing their awareness of migrant rights (Wijaya et al., 2018).

Despite their marginalized status, isolated lives and rudimentary training, Filipino caregivers in Israel have managed to create a professional community and a feeling of professionalism through extensive use of Facebook (Golan & Babis, 2019a). A study of male Filipino migrant workers in South Korea, which explored their performance of online identities on Facebook, found that such narratives can highlight facets of offline life that allow migrants a measure of biographical stability (Camposano, 2018). Facebook has also become a key platform for Filipino migrant workers in Israel to represent and articulate their affinity with their host country and culture by expressing and elaborating a host national identity (Golan & Babis, 2019b).

The current study contributes to the literature by expanding existing knowledge on international labor migrants' use of social media and its intersection with the field of social capital. Specifically, we explore this intersection in an isolated and marginalized migrant worker community during a global pandemic.

Social Capital and COVID-19

While there are many definitions of social capital, the most pertinent to the issue at hand is that of Bordieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 119), who define it as the sum of the actual and virtual social structures and relationships used to pursue individual and communal interests. Also of relevance are Adler and Kwon's (2002) notion of goodwill and Robison, Schmid and Siles' (2002) concept of sympathy – whereby the object of another's sympathy and goodwill has social capital, and those who have sympathy and goodwill for others provide social capital.

Social capital has also been explored and analyzed according to the level at which it is embodied: individual vs. communal (Au, 2019). While the former level emphasizes social capital as an investment in social relations whose benefits are felt by the individual involved (Lin, 2002; Lin & Erickson, 2008), in communal social capital the benefits are felt by the community as a whole, in Putnam's (2000) sense, arguing that when a person "comes into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors…[the] community as a whole will benefit by the cooperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors" (p. 19). In keeping with this definition, communal social capital can thus be seen as those resources used mainly to pursue interests as a community.

Alongside worldwide growth in the use of social media in daily life, studies have explored the emergence of social capital on digital platforms. These studies differentiate between online and offline social capital and point to the dynamics between them (de Zúñiga, Barnidge & Scherman, 2017; Huang, Zheng & Fan, 2021; Trepte, Reinecke & Juechems, 2012). In this study we propose the concept of *online communal social capital*, whose central premise is that online social networks have value. Furthermore, the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other create a sense of comradeship and provide a wide variety of benefits that flow from the trust, reciprocity, information and cooperation associated with online social networks.

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, researchers explored social capital in the context of the pandemic. Studies focusing on health have looked at the influence of social capital on the level and growth rate of infections and deaths (Borgonovi & Andrieu, 2020; Elgar, Stefaniak & Wohl, 2020; Makridis & Wu, 2021), as well as the use of social capital as health policy responses (Wong & Kohler, 2020). Other studies have focused on the influence of social capital during the pandemic on e-business (Al-Omoush, Simón-Moya & Sendra-García, 2020), professionals (Zhang, Gao, Tang & Li, 2021) and students (Giavrimis & Nikolaou, 2020). However, to the best of our knowledge, no study has explored the communal social capital accumulated via social media in migrant communities, international labor migrants included, during COVID-19.

Methodology

This study combines qualitative data collected from in-depth interviews and digital ethnography (Dalsgaard, 2016) with qualitative and quantitative data gathered from a digital questionnaire (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). These multiple methods allow us to present different dimensions of the phenomenon under study simultaneously.

We conducted 20 in-depth interviews in June and July 2020 with 15 women and 5 men, ages 35–50, working for 1–15 years in various locations in Israel. We interviewed some face-to-face, and reached others by phone or Whatsapp video (due to lockdown restrictions). Interviews lasted about one hour. All interviewees took part voluntarily and their anonymity was guaranteed (all names presented here, for all sources of data, are pseudonyms). After the first round of interviews, we interviewed former Filipino caregivers who volunteered to help the community during the lockdowns. All interviews were held in English.

The digital ethnography was carried out by collecting and analyzing over 1,000 posts and photos on Filipino community Facebook groups in Israel, as well as those of individual Facebook walls of community members. Access to these pages was possible as the first author has a network of over 1,100 Filipino international labor migrant Facebook friends, all of whom know the author is a researcher. The data gathering approach was developed using the digital ethnographic approach of "data capture," namely, making a record of posts on Facebook platforms, as well as the comments following these posts (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor, 2012). The quotes are presented below in English, along with an indication of the language in which they were originally written.

In addition, a two-part online questionnaire in English was widely and randomly distributed to the Filipino community via Facebook. The first part requested demographic background information and inquired about the type of job they held, their length of stay in Israel and their philanthropic activities (type, amount, aim) during the COVID-19 lockdown. The second part included four open-ended questions about their experiences during the lockdown, leaving space for lengthy responses. The questionnaire was posted on various open and private Filipino community Facebook groups in Israel. Through this convenience sampling method, 288 people completed the questionnaire. All responded voluntarily and their anonymity was assured. Of the 288 respondents, 81% were Filipino caregivers and 19% held other jobs; 92% were female and 8% were male. They had been working in Israel between six months and 24 years.

While we collected the data from the interviews and digital questionnaires during and immediately following the first lockdown in Israel, we began collecting the data using digital ethnography on Facebook at the beginning of the lockdown (March 13, 2020) and continued doing so until the end of March 2021.

We analyzed the quantitative data using descriptive analysis and the qualitative data according to grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The combination of methods implied different content analyses: phenomenological categorical analysis of the interviews; ethnographic digital analysis of the Facebook posts (Dalsgaard, 2016); and qualitative content analysis of the questionnaire that entailed inductive development of categories and deductive application of categories to themes (Krippendorff, 2011).

Findings

As mentioned, a previous study of Filipino caregivers in Israel during COVID-19 revealed that philanthropic activities – by individuals and community-based organizations – were one of the main practices Filipino caregivers adopted to cope with the challenges they faced (Sabar et al., 2021). The current study reveals how the Filipino community used its offline and online communal social capital to cope with the major challenges its members faced during the lockdown and the first months of the pandemic. These challenges included: (1) job loss with no government support, (2) loss of their day off and loss of the ability to meet other Filipino caregivers in person, (3) lack of access to information on COVID-19 relevant to Israel and (4) potential loss of their visa after giving birth.

Job Loss with No Government Support

The most salient challenge faced by live-out domestic workers – documented and undocumented – was losing their jobs as a result of restrictions on movement under lockdown conditions that prevented them from reaching their place of work. Whereas Israeli citizens who lost their jobs received financial support from the government, these migrants were not eligible for this crucial help and so were left with no income and very little savings. The first to offer assistance were working live-in Filipino caregivers, who bought their personal friends food and paid their rent. These were quick, spontaneous acts that benefited both recipients and donors. In some cases, Filipino caregivers used social media to offer help to those in need. For example, Angelica, in a post accompanied by a picture of $400 published on her Facebook wall, wrote:

> *It is my birthday today. I just wish everyone will be healthy and safe during this time of pandemic. Being thankful to God He is there always for me and my family. I want to share my blessings to others who are in need ... PLEASE HELP ME TO FIND SOMEONE WHO REALLY NEEDS HELP. This is what I want to do on my birthday, it is not big money but*

> *it is coming from my heart. Thank you everyone for your greetings. God bless us all* (written in English).

Based on these spontaneous individual acts of help, which continued throughout the lockdown, a large-scale assistance operation developed within the community using online platforms to reach both those in need and those able to assist.[5] James, a Filipino caregiver and a community leader, explained to us in the interview:

> *Through social media, a Facebook page of Filipino volunteers in Israel… we combine the idea how to connect with people without jobs during the lockdown. We agreed for a fundraising campaign… and that was the urgency of our project, how to collect money. … We reached out [to] the people who still had their jobs, who [were] still working, so they [could afford] to give donations, some cash, groceries. Any donation we accepted.* (James, 45, 13 years in Israel).

A few weeks into the lockdown, posts recruiting donations appeared in a closed Facebook group with more than 30,000 members.[6] These posts – usually combining a short text and an illustration of assistance – were shared on Facebook by community leaders. All emphasized the importance of community solidarity in times of crisis. For example:

> *NO ONE WILL BE LEFT OUT!*
> *Let's embrace our countrymen who are short and affected by the crisis.*
> *This is when they need us. Life has its ups and downs* (written in Tagalog).
> *...*
> *Reach out and touch someone!*
> *Show that you care.*
> *Let them know that they are not alone* (written in English).
> *...*
> Another one said:
> *NOBODY LIVES JUST FOR THEMSELVES: The crisis we are going through has only one message and that is "TO HELP ONE ANOTHER."*

[5] The food delivery campaign was organized entirely by members of the Filipino community, with no involvement of the Philippine Embassy or the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) in the Philippines.

[6] The majority of its members lived in Israel, although some were former caregivers in Israel who had left but remained in this closed group.

> *When a community works together it means we are UNITED … Let's put an end to selfishness, let's help others even in smallest ways. Because when such time comes that we are in need, those whom we helped will help us back…* (written in Tagalog).

Other posts praised the community's quick response in collecting and distributing food for the needy and specifically mentioned the role of social media in this communal help. Some calls were posted on Facebook groups as the help was distributed:

> *The Mission is continuing to achieve the GOAL…. Our frontliner Mary is now on his way to collect donations as part of the Filcom fundraising campaign …. For those who want to give money, groceries or any donation, you can call him at 054xxxxx … Thank you very much* (written in Tagalog).

Within days, this initiative evolved into an unprecedented large-scale food package operation. In total, about 2,000 food packages were distributed at an approximate cost of $20 per pack. A large group of volunteer backliners bought and packaged food that was distributed by frontliners to Filipinos all over Israel who had lost their jobs and were in dire need. Daily posts were uploaded on the Facebook group sharing pictures of the money collected and the goods distributed (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Pictures in a Facebook post showing the money collected

Collecting money in the midst of a lockdown was challenging. First, it required creative ways of reaching donors within lockdown restrictions. Second, as most Filipino caregivers lack bank accounts in Israel, no digital monetary transactions were possible, and all donations were in cash. The handling of large sums of cash required not only logistics, but mainly trust. To gain and maintain trust, the movements of all volunteers were documented and posted on Facebook. As Mark, one of the leading volunteers, said: *"Every move I made I posted on Facebook, because this is the only way to show our sponsors, our donors, that I'm taking good care of their help."* Mark emphasizes the crucial role Facebook played not only in reaching out to the needy, but also in gaining the trust of donors.

As a way of establishing accountability within the community, pictures of all campaign activities – buying, packing and distributing food – were shared on Facebook. One of the volunteers, for example, posted on her Facebook wall pictures of what they bought at the supermarket for distribution (see Figure 2) and wrote:

> *Late night repacking of 60 relief goods for our in-need kababayan [fellow Filipinos] caused by COVID-19 [outbreak], our 5th wave of distribution allotted for today. Tiring? Literally yes, but we are always reminded of this verse from the bible...*
> *True happiness is found in helping others. Anywhere you find yourself, always remind yourself of this ....*
> *We will never tire of thanking all our individual sponsors and the entire Filcom fundraising campaign. Without you we cannot do it ...* (written in English).

Figure 2: Pictures in a Facebook post showing products volunteers bought at the supermarket for distribution

It should be noted that these Facebook posts specifically mentioned the wide geographical span of the food package distribution operation, from Eilat and Beer Sheva in the south to Haifa and Nahariya in the north. In doing so, they emphasize the inclusive nature of their community and its commitment to all, regardless of place of residence.

Recipients also used their Facebook walls to share pictures of the food packages they got, expressing their gratitude (see Figure 3): *"To all who make up the Filipino volunteers, thank you very much for the help you have given us"* (written in Tagalog).

Figure 3: Picture in a Facebook post showing the food packages received

According to the quantitative data collected in the study, 40% of community members gave donations averaging $100 to the community over 4–5 months (65% gave transnational philanthropy, averaging $300). These philanthropic activities within the host country not only offered relief to community members in need, but also fortified the community as a whole. The creation of online communality, mainly by assisting those in need, enabled isolated donors and recipients alike to regain a sense of belonging and connection in the host country. These feelings were nourished by such Facebook posts as the ones presented above, which shared step-by-step accounts of the operation with the entire community and beyond.

Loss of their Day Off; Loss of their Face-to-Face Communal Life

Once the lockdown was announced, Filipinos who worked as live-in caregivers found themselves locked in with their employers, in the latter's homes or in assisted living facilities, and subject to strict regulations restricting their movements. Like most Israelis, many experienced fear, a sense of fragility and uncertainty, but they also faced unique challenges, mainly those related to losing even their limited free time. Many Filipino caregivers were locked in their homes with their employers 24/7, with no day off[7] and no free time. As most of them cared for elderly people, who were the most vulnerable population in the pandemic, employers or their families forbade the caregivers from going out even to buy food and medicine. As one of our informants stated four months into the pandemic:

> *…the most difficult situation is that I'm still not allowed to go outside [even] now. It's been 4 months that my employer is not allowing me to go and take my rest day … I want to see my sister and I want to breathe fresh air and see some of my friends* (Jennifer, 49, 11 years in Israel).

The denial of a day off thus had far greater repercussions than losing one's only free time. It led to a total shutdown of any face-to-face meetings and activities with other Filipino caregivers. As mentioned, most routine community meetings and activities, prior to the pandemic, took place on weekends, when most Filipino caregivers in Israel took their day off. These communal events, such as church meetings, cultural festivals, beauty contests and other celebrations, offer an arena in which Filipino caregivers meet, exchange information, gain friends and express themselves by dancing and singing.

As this physical arena was not available during lockdown, new ones were created online. Specific Filipino organizations within the community launched activities on Facebook such as church services, Bible study lessons, beauty contests, and song and dance competitions. One large-scale contest, called "Chinita Marikit[8] online dance showdown," was organized by Philsca (Philippine Society for Culture and Arts) during Israel's second lockdown. The organization posted the time frame, rules, regulations and criteria for judging on Facebook. Only Filipino caregivers in Israel were eligible to participate (see Figure 4).

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[7] Usually, caregivers have one full day off a week. The denial of such a day off is illegal unless the employee is willing to waive this right in return for additional payment. However, the situation changed drastically during the lockdown. According to data from our interviews and digital questionnaire, some caregivers received payment for staying with their employer during their days off, while others were denied extra payment and felt frustrated. Caregivers who received remuneration mentioned they would have preferred to take the day off.

[8] "Chinita Marikit" (meaning "Beautiful Chinese-looking Filipina") is a popular song in the Philippines.

Figure 4: Call for participants for "Chinita Marikit online dance showdown"

Within hours, the post reached thousands of Filipinos all over the country. Many started recording their dances, following the music of the "Chinita Marikit" song provided in the organization's TikTok account. As the response was much greater than the organizers expected, they had to post an apology Facebook post announcing that only 100 entries would be accepted. The videos of all of these participants' dances, mostly recorded in their employers' homes, were uploaded to Philsca's Facebook page (see examples in Figure 5), along with the names and pictures of the judges (Figure 6). Although the event was executed on a digital platform, its organization was as similar as possible to a real face-to-face event, including impressive videos prepared by the organizers to announce the winners.

By uploading their dance video onto the competition's Facebook page, participants were able to show their talent to thousands of community members, reaching a far greater audience than in the face-to-face format. Based on our informants' posts, being part of this communal digital contest reinforced their sense of belonging to the Filipino community, expanded the number of their online friends and supporters, and strengthened the importance of the community in their lives.

Figure 5: Videos of dance participants in the Chinita Marikit online dance showdown

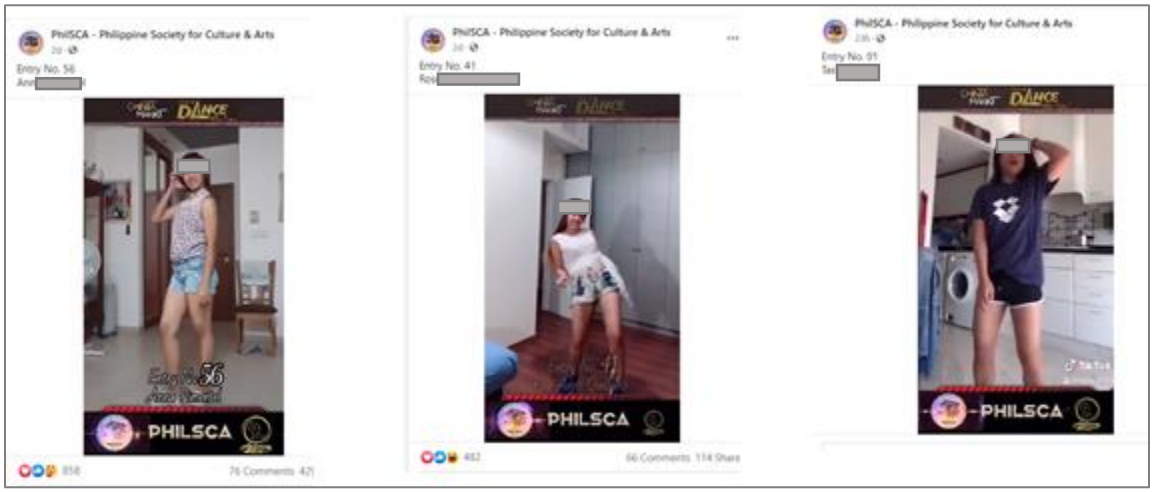


Figure 6: Announcement of judges in the "Chinita Marikit online dance showdown"

Lack of Access to Information

Obviously, the first weeks of the pandemic were stressful for all. People sought information from all available media, local and global. Three weeks into the pandemic the Israeli Ministry of Health added English and Arabic to its official Hebrew site, making its rules and regulations more

accessible. Yet, the details about the total number of infected and dead in Israel were published daily on Israeli media in Hebrew and Arabic only, leaving many uninformed. Filipino community leaders overcame this challenge through social media. Recognizing the need for accurate local information, they posted a list of cities with high rates of COVID-19 and the names of old-age homes with high rates of infection daily on Facebook, in Tagalog or English. Information on the number of Filipino caregivers who contracted the virus or died was also posted and shared on Facebook groups and on Facebook walls (see Figure 7). This act of making information accessible and relevant to Filipino caregivers in Israel enabled them to be informed, updated and connected.

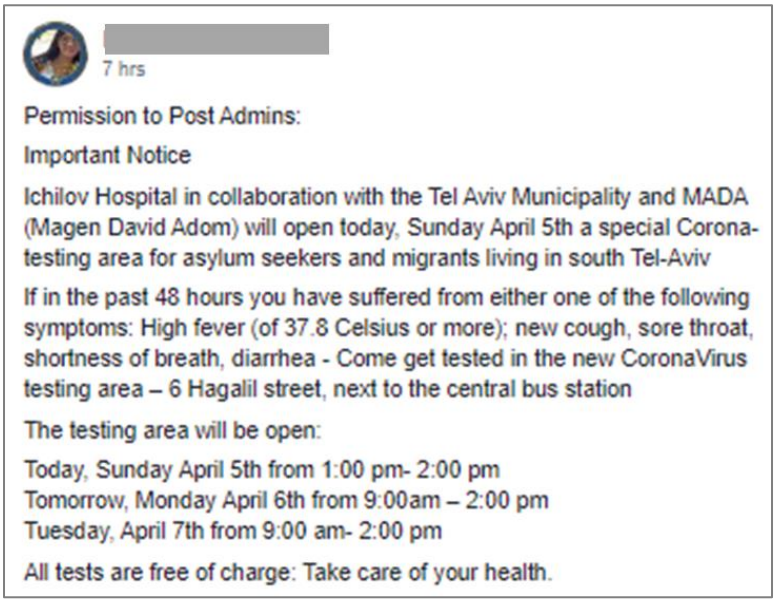
Figure 7: Post with information on infected Filipinos in Israel (posted March 4, 2021)

Beyond providing information in Tagalog and English regarding the virus, restrictions and the numbers of infected and dead, the posts also disseminated information about visa regulations relevant to international labor migrants during the lockdown. The most important were those related to state policies concerning undocumented migrants and regulations regarding the extension of work visas for those who were documented.

It should be noted that information about visa regulations had been posted prior to the pandemic on the Philippine Embassy website, on migrant organizations' websites, and by individuals on their private Facebook pages. However, these sites were never the sole sources of information, but rather supplemented that provided by the Israeli authorities. During the pandemic, these sources were the first to respond to a dire need, providing accurate information relevant to the changing circumstances. For example, a post uploaded a few days into the lockdown said: *"The immigration authorities and the government will not be apprehending people without visas until the end of the COVID-19 crisis…"* (written in Tagalog).

Other posts, uploaded on either Facebook groups or Facebook walls, were related to services the Israel Ministry of Health provided to international labor migrants regardless of their legal status, such as free testing for the virus (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Information on COVID-19 testing for migrant workers in south Tel Aviv



The provision of this information on social media empowered many and helped them feel more secure in an unstable situation. The posts with detailed local information received thousands of "likes" and were shared with others, who added many comments, thereby actively accumulating and using online communal social capital.

Loss of their Visa after Giving Birth

As mentioned above, one of the main tactics to prevent international labor migrants from settling in Israel is to restrict their ability to establish a family in the country, and particularly to prevent them from keeping their newborns in Israel if they want to maintain a valid work visa. As a result, most Filipino caregivers send their babies to the Philippines so they can continue working in Israel. Sometimes the mothers themselves bring their babies to their families in the Philippines and then return to Israel to work, but usually they send them with a relative or friend going home for vacation. During the lockdowns, the pandemic prevented Filipino caregivers from travelling home. In fact, it was virtually impossible to get airline tickets to travel abroad from Israel. Even though the state halted deportations during the pandemic, Filipino caregiver mothers with young babies found themselves in a challenging situation, as their visas were not renewed.

According to Facebook posts, as soon as flights became available in August 2020, six months into the pandemic, leaders of the Filipino community established a novel system to help mothers send their babies to the Philippines: they matched newborn babies with Filipinos who had decided to return home for good. This operation, which became communal, was made possible by the

community life already salient on social media and by the trust that had developed over the years between members of the community. The leaders used closed Facebook groups, considered reliable and trustworthy platforms for fellow Filipinos in Israel, to disseminate essential and sensitive information among the community's tens of thousands of members.

A post announcing the first group of eight babies to leave Israel was accompanied by photos of them at the Tel Aviv airport. In this post, community leaders emphasized that the most appropriate people were chosen to take the babies to the Philippines. One of the leaders, who was among the returnees, posted information on his Facebook wall to keep mothers and the community informed about the babies throughout the journey. For example, once the flight from Israel landed in Istanbul, he posted:

> *We are in Turkey now, babies and their babysitters are currently taking a break...* 
> (written in Tagalog; posted on the volunteer's personal Facebook wall, August 11, 2020).
>
> When *Three things to do today:*
> *1. wake up*
> *2. miss you*
> *3. survive*
> *I will miss you so much my child. I hope you make it safely.*
> *... It seems like my heart is going to explode, my child ...*
> *To all those who helped us send our children home, thank you very much...*
> *I salute all the mothers who sent their babies with mine, what we are going through is not easy right now ...* (written in Tagalog).

they landed in Manila, he shared on his Facebook wall a live video of each of the babies with their babysitters, showing that the newborns had arrived in the Philippines in good condition and had been well treated. The video had 1,700 hits and received dozens of comments in which members of the community congratulated and blessed the babysitters and thanked them for making this mission successful.

Unlike pre-COVID-19 times, when sending a baby to the Philippines was a private, individual act, where a friend or relative took the baby, during the pandemic it became a communal operation published and documented on Facebook, the most public and widespread arena possible. Several such groups of babies were sent to the Philippines between August and December 2020. In all cases, digital networks provided a mechanism of control, trust and safety for mothers who sent

their babies with virtual strangers. In addition, the publicity of the event became a medium through which the mothers could share their sorrow and receive comfort. For example, one of the mothers posted on her Facebook wall:

This last example is a clear case where online communal social capital, accumulated over the years, is translated into a sensitive lifesaving operation carried out by individual members, who do not necessarily know each other but are part of a large offline and online community. In other words, the various aspects of networks and feelings of trust that give the Filipino collectivity a sense of community, enabling individuals to draw upon community resources, are a salient example of how online communal social capital is created and used.

Discussion: Coping with COVID-19 through Online Communal Social Capital

This study examined how Filipino migrants in Israel, working as caregivers, used social media to initiate and execute activities that enabled them to overcome some of the COVID-19 challenges. Digital technology is part of everyday life for migrant workers in general (Acedera & Yeoh, 2018; Cabalquinto, 2018; Cabanes & Acedera, 2012; Chib et al., 2014; Dubinsky, 2020; Longhurst, 2013; Madianaou & Miller, 2013) and Filipino caregivers in Israel in particular (Babis, 2020; Golan & Babis, 2019a; 2019b). The nature of their lives as caregivers has made the vast majority of the Filipino community in Israel active participants in and consumers of social media. In normal times, they enjoy both worlds – the one developed and maintained via social media, and the real-world, face-to-face encounters during weekend meetings, trips, cultural celebrations and church services. Obviously, activities in online and offline arenas intersected and fed each other. However, when social distance policies were strictly imposed due to the pandemic, social media became the key arena for all individual and community engagements. Social media thus served as an essential tool enabling users to cope with the challenges of the pandemic.

In his seminal work, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, Bauman (2011) explored various aspects of what he calls liquid modernity: a condition characterized by the fragility and transience of social bonds, the handing off of responsibilities from the state to the individual, and the emergence of new forms of disengaged extraterritorial power. Bauman (2011) claimed that, within the world of liquid modernity, "networks replace structures" (p. 14). Based on this definition of culture in liquid modernity, we claim that, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, in an attempt to grapple with the unstable and fluid present and the uncertain future, Filipino caregivers took over some responsibilities of the state, particularly the provision of accurate information and essential goods. Doing so was possible mainly due to the offline and online social capital accumulated over the years by individual Filipino caregivers and their community as a whole. Moreover, the Filipino

community used its online networks, mainly Facebook, to maintain stability and restore a familiar daily routine.

Our findings show that Filipino caregivers utilized the Facebook platform during the pandemic to accumulate online communal social capital in several ways: managing self-help philanthropic campaigns such as the distribution of food packages to help the needy in the community; organizing digital communal events, enabling isolated Filipino caregivers to be actively involved; providing information about the COVID-19 situation in Israel and in the Filipino community and creating a communal operation to send babies to the Philippines.

As shown, the boundaries between private and communal matters became blurred in the first months of the pandemic, as challenges considered individual or private in regular times became communal issues and received an organized response through Facebook. In addition, through these communal digital initiatives, thousands of isolated Filipino caregivers could be involved in various community events and operations as both active participants and online supporters. While previous studies of migrant workers and Facebook have emphasized the contribution of social media to creating and empowering communities (Le Duc, 2016; Wijaya et al., 2018), our study adds an analysis from the perspective of social capital – specifically, the dimension of online communal social capital via Facebook.

The communal use of closed Facebook groups during the first months of the pandemic emphasized the crucial role social media played not only in enabling personal communication during the lockdown, but also in facilitating the accumulation and consolidation of communal social capital in a community of isolated migrant workers. Unlike individual social capital, communal social capital emphasizes the role of the community in building the capital. Following Putnam (2001), not only does social capital include social ties that connect people together; it is also the oil that allows communal initiatives and dynamics to flourish.

Following research distinguishing between individual and communal social capital (Au, 2019) on one hand, and online and offline social capital (de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Huang et al., 2021; Trepte et al., 2012) on the other, we introduce the concepts of "online individual social capital" and "online communal social capital." While the lockdown made Filipino migrant workers feel fragile as a result of losing their jobs, loneliness, fear, isolation or the threat of losing their visas, the communal projects that emerged on social media during the pandemic nourished and reinforced their sense of belonging and stability, whether they took an active part as donors, recipients, dancers and the like or were "just" online viewers and supporters. In a previous study (Sabar et al., 2021), we showed that individuals from the Filipino community who led philanthropic operations during COVID-19 used online networks such as Facebook, Whatsapp and Instagram. Some reported that their philanthropic work positioned them as trusted leaders, while others complained that their efforts not only drained their personal capital, but also were not properly appreciated by

members of their own community. In this study, we demonstrated that Filipino individuals who took part in online community activities not only expanded their online individual social capital, but also strengthened the power of the community in times of social distancing in a foreign country by means of online communal social capital.

It should be noted that the use of Facebook groups to launch activities aimed at assisting Filipino caregivers in need during the COVID-19 lockdown and creating online communal social capital did not emerge out of a vacuum. Rather, it was a direct continuation, extension and expansion of communal activities that had started several years prior, which we refer to as offline communal social capital. The digital public nature of the activities during the pandemic increased social bonding and mobilized growing numbers of people to take part, reinforcing a sense of belonging to the community in times of crisis and therefore fortifying the online communal social capital.

Our findings suggest that the formation of online communal social capital during the first months of the COVID-19 crisis was not an obvious and inevitable outcome of social media usage by migrants in response to the challenges of the pandemic. For instance, in their study on diaspora vlogger migrants during COVID-19, Zhang and Zhao (2020) found that Chinese YouTube vloggers around the world shared their experiences and feelings during the pandemic, inviting viewers to co-construct an emotional experience. While the digital practices of these vloggers can be considered online individual social capital, their involvement in social media did not lead to the formation of online communal social capital. We claim that the creation of online communal social capital within migrant communities may emerge in specific social media platforms (closed groups on Facebook) juxtaposed with a specific geographic location (Israel) and accompanied by a strong pre-existing base of offline communal practices.

We suggest that future studies explore the creation of online communal social capital among other groups of migrants, both in Israel and in other countries. Furthermore, this topic should be examined in other digital platforms, such as Instagram and Whatsapp, and not only during periods of crisis.

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