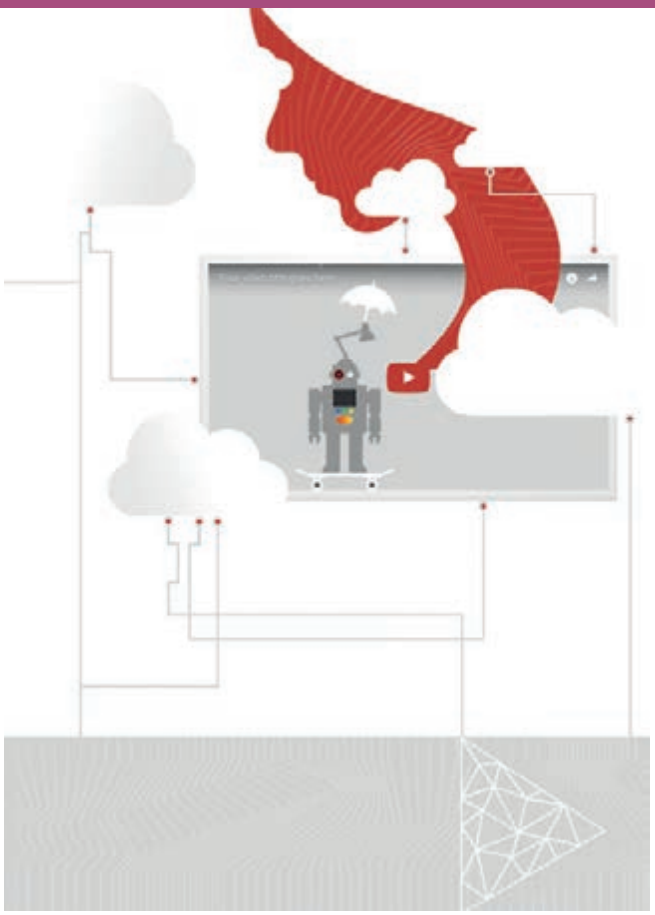
ASIAN VISUAL CULTURES



Cheryll Ruth Soriano and Earvin Charles Cabalquinto

Philippine Digital Cultures

Brokerage Dynamics on YouTube

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Asian Visual Cultures

This series focuses on visual cultures that are produced, distributed and consumed in Asia and by Asian communities worldwide. Visual cultures have been implicated in creative policies of the state and in global cultural networks (such as the art world, film festivals and the Internet), particularly since the emergence of digital technologies. Asia is home to some of the major film, television and video industries in the world, while Asian contemporary artists are selling their works for record prices at the international art markets. Visual communication and innovation is also thriving in transnational networks and communities at the grass-roots level. Asian Visual Cultures seeks to explore how the texts and contexts of Asian visual cultures shape, express and negotiate new forms of creativity, subjectivity and cultural politics. It specifically aims to probe into the political, commercial and digital contexts in which visual cultures emerge and circulate, and to trace the potential of these cultures for political or social critique. It welcomes scholarly monographs and edited volumes in English by both established and early-career researchers.

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1 Lights, Camera, and Click the Notification Bell!

Abstract

This introductory chapter underscores YouTube as a critical site for understanding the rapid social, economic, political, and digital transformations in neoliberal and postcolonial Philippines. It situates brokering on YouTube within the evolving political, economic and media systems in the Philippine context, foregrounding the distinctive affective performances of Filipino YouTubers in networked publics. This chapter also presents the methodological considerations of the research study as well as the organisation of the book.

Keywords: brokerage, digital cultures, neoliberal globalisation, social media, postcolonial Philippines, YouTube

In recent years, we have witnessed the meteoric rise of influencers. Ordinary individuals expose their most intimate lives, generating massive followers. YouTube, as one of the most popular online platforms in the twenty-first century, has birthed influencers, including Swedish YouTuber PewDiePie and YouTube's youngest millionaire Ryan Kaji as examples. In the Philippines, YouTubers such as the late Lloyd Cadena, Michelle Dy, Zeinab Harake, Ja Mil, Ivana Alawi, and Mimiyuuuh, to name a few, have occupied the platform, with their channels becoming embedded in the Filipinos' everyday lives. These figures have essentially become constitutive of Filipinos' appetite for the consumption of informative and entertaining content. Whether based in or outside the Philippines, they are already part and parcel of Filipino households. Notably, their creative take on genres, unique performances, and interactive branding strategies are paving the way for their visibility, popularity, and even amassing fortune within and beyond social media. In a networked space, they produce, distribute, and monetise mundane, intimate, and random content, ranging from exclusive

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confessions, skills and knowledge enhancement, talent showcase, up to as outrageous as playing a prank on someone. At the other end of the screen, diverse audiences watch, like, or share these contents and can opt to subscribe or follow content creators that resonate with them. It is through this dynamic and networked environment where sociality, aspirations, and profit-making coalesce.

Of late, YouTube's role in the media ecosystem has expanded from catering to lifestyle videos into being somewhat of an "academy," where we find a broad range of information that build skills and exchange know-how, or what Utz and Wolfers (2020) call "epistemic communities." YouTube has turned into an interactive and shared space where creators share information and experience while users watch and learn in a social environment. This development collides with the participatory and do-it-yourself (DIY) culture in social media (Jenkins, 2006) and the cultural norms surrounding the "broadcast yourself" culture on YouTube, which facilitated an environment conducive to new modes of discovery and learning from the ordinary person, the experts of lived experience. This use of the academy metaphor for YouTube aligns with the claims of Susan Wojcicki, YouTube's Chief Executive Officer, indicating that YouTube is "more like a library in many ways, because of the sheer amount of video that we have, and the ability for people to learn and to look up any kind of information" (Thompson, 2018). Amid critical analyses of these "academy" or "library" metaphors vis-à-vis the nature of a platform's relationship with its users (Wyatt, 2021), it cannot be denied that with the platform's popularity – recently reported as the leading social media platform used by 97.2% of Internet users in the Philippines (We are Social, 2021) – and with the capacity to monetise content therein, it continually attracts content creators, now becoming a site holding millions of videos conveying people's everyday expressions, desires, and know-how.

The popularity of YouTube in the Philippines can be traced back to its pivotal role in stirring the career of aspiring celebrities in the Philippines. In 2007, Charice Pempengco, a young kid at that time, belted out a powerful Whitney Houston classic, "I Will always Love You," on a local reality talent show on television. While her performance landed her third, a fan uploaded a video of her performance on YouTube. The video became "viral" and generated millions of views from in and outside the Philippines. It is through the video that Charice rose to international stardom, initially invited to sing in a South Korean Talent show, *Star King* and eventually to appear as guest in prominent American talk shows, including *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* and *Oprah*. From there, Charice appeared in the popular American television series *Glee,* started performing across world-class venues, and worked with

international stars in concerts and albums. Apart from Charice, other artists such as Arnel Pineda also landed an international career through YouTube. Arnel and his band named *The Zoo* once did a cover of classic Journey songs, including "Don't Stop Believin," and posted it on YouTube. The video led to Arnel's discovery to become the new lead singer of the legendary rock band Journey in 2007. Indeed, the success stories of Charice, who is more recently known as Jake Zyrus after coming out as a transgender male, and Arnel Pineda would not have been made possible without the networked connectivity and global exposure enabled by YouTube.

It is important to point out that the media has long been an important entry point for accessing fame and fortune, especially among celebrity-crazed Filipinos who navigate and negotiate the precarious and stringent social conditions in the Philippines. Ordinary Filipinos must deal with the everyday challenges of accessing social welfare benefits and job opportunities, with many ultimately deciding to move and work overseas (Rodriguez, 2010). Meanwhile, Philippine television has been perceived as a platform for earning profit and accessing stardom (A. Pertierra, 2018; J. Ong, 2015). This orientation of traversing precarious conditions has also been co-opted by Philippine entertainment media as reflected in capturing the Filipinos' aspirations to be discovered, overcome poor conditions, and help family members financially through a multitude of "showcase your talent" programs, game shows, and beauty pageants. Like television, YouTube, carrying an array of possibilities – global presence, celebrity status, and profit – attracts ordinary Filipinos to realise success via the creation of aspirational amateur videos. So along with the likes of Charice and Arnel who were "discovered" via YouTube, Filipino YouTubers have begun capitalising on the platform to visibilise their everyday and intimate lives or skills and knowledge, in the hopes of achieving a good and successful life amid the shortcomings of public institutions. As such, YouTube becomes a key site to both articulate those aspirations through content creation and for Filipinos to use YouTube as a vehicle to achieve those aspirations. In turn, these YouTubers, through their videos and the platform's features of facilitating communities of subscribers and viewers, continually cascade aspirations to others.

Following the successes of Charice and Arnel, YouTube tapped on the Philippine market by creating a local team in 2011. This opened opportunities for partnerships with existing media companies, such as GMA-7, ABS-CBN and TV5, as well as with local creatives like Filipino Society of Composers, Authors, Publishers (FILSCAP) and advertisers such as the multinational company Procter and Gamble (Olchondra, 2011). The local team also started

the YouTube Partnership Program (YPP) in the Philippines, paving the way for Filipino content creators or YouTubers to monetise their content (Olchondra, 2011). The program has a sales team which deals with engaging content creators, promoting the use of analytics in their channels, managing targeted advertisements, and implementing copyright restrictions on content. At the time of the launch, a press release produced by a television network highlighted:

> Whether you want to be the next Charice, earn ad sales from original videos with the potential to "go viral," or promote a brand, the localised version of online video-sharing site YouTube will have you seeing numbers in a good way. (Olchondra, 2011)

In this statement, the allure of fame and possibly fortune through virality is implied. Particularly, it emphasises what networked connectivity can deliver, especially among YouTubers who consider the platform not only as a tool for cultural expression (Burges & Green, 2018) but also for monetisation (García-Rapp, 2017). It is also important to note that Google promoted the advantages of networked and global connectivity as "YouTube Philippines also gives local creators and brands the opportunity to increase exposure not only nationwide but globally as well" (Olchondra, 2011). Nevertheless, YouTube is framed as a space that affords profitability on a national and global scale.

This book presents a critical investigation of YouTube as an important site for examining Philippine modernity amid economic globalisation, although the ideas here may resonate with the experiences in other countries in the Global South and in facilitating reflections on digital cultures elsewhere. YouTube, a video and networked-based platform founded in 2005 in the United States and eventually bought by Google in 2006, has essentially become an integral part of the everyday lives of Filipinos. As one of the most highly subscribed social media platforms in the Philippines (We are Social, 2020), its contributions in shaping the Filipino's consciousness and aspiration necessitate a critical examination especially at a time of expansive digitalisation and global capitalism. Considered as one of the top markets for YouTube, the number of Filipino subscribers over the past three years increased by 20 times, while the number of channels with more than one million subscribers has increased 10 times from 2016 to 2019 (Mercurio, 2019). In the Philippines, which is once hailed as the social media capital of the world (Mateo, 2018), YouTube is also one of the major platforms that Filipino content creators utilise in creating online presence,

branding, fostering communities, and sustaining social networks. After all, it is where the audiences are as YouTube becomes a one-stop space for Filipinos to seek information, follow a certain activity, or learn or improve a skill. Ultimately, YouTube is therefore set to be more deeply embedded in the fabric of Philippine society.

As the first book presenting a systematic and theoretical analysis of YouTube and digital cultures in the Philippines, we approach content and practices on the platform as shaped by socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-political and socio-historical conditions. In a similar way, we locate YouTube's role in the transformation of the Philippine social and digital landscape, by paying attention to the often creative, playful, affective, and personalised contents produced by Filipino YouTubers as case studies of the brokerage dynamics of Philippine modernity in digital times. YouTubers capitalise on producing their own media content in a rich and convergent media environment (Jenkins, 2006). They are considered ordinary individuals who utilise media channels in visibilising their most intimate and personal lives in and through the media, which Turner (2009) conceptualises as the "demotic turn." Those who amass a significant viewership are considered "micro-celebrities" (Senft, 2018) who use digital communication technologies to enable interactions as well as generate and sustain popularity. Abidin (2015) also identifies them as "influencers," typically maximising the use of social media channels to generate thousands and millions of followers and generate profit. The performances visibilised through diverse content and even offline engagements by such influencers are anchored on certain branding strategies (Marwick, 2013) such as developing intimate (Abidin, 2015), raw, and affective narratives (Berryman & Kavka, 2017) typically shaped by entrepreneurial influences and guidelines (Banet-Weiser & Juhasz, 2011; Duffy, 2017). For this book, we focus on the dynamics of aspirational content creation and engagement practices of Filipino YouTubers, which remains understudied amid the growing studies examining the intersections of digital media, influencer culture, creative cultural production, and platformisation elsewhere.

We also approach YouTube content as part of the broader platform ecosystem, configured by its affordances and governance structures. The content produced and consumed online are shaped by platform logics, operating through the platform's business model and governance mechanisms (van Dijck, 2013). For instance, what appears in the interface of a platform is often a by-product of the "popularity principle." This means that the most shared, the most liked, and the most commented posts have a greater chance of appearing and being recommended on the platform. The visibility and

access to certain content are then shaped by these recommendations. Reviglio and Agosti (2020) point out, for example, that YouTube's recommendation systems "drive more than 70% of the time spent in the video sharing platform and 90% of the "related content" is indeed personalised (p. 10). Tied to capturing online interactions, this modulates our attention on particular content over others (Bucher, 2012). Through such processes, connectedness is moulded by the platform's logics, including the interface and tags to record and present data, the algorithms processing the data, as well as the flows of profit through targeted advertising (Andrejevic, 2007; van Dijck, 2013).

Yet YouTubers are not only governed by these structures – they anchor their strategies on these structures to make their content more visible, to expand their communities, or to advance their personal and professional agenda. Thus, as we will show throughout the book, YouTubers' work lies in this interplay of YouTube's affordances and governance mechanisms with the content creators' strategic use of the platform that privileges them with visibility and renders relevance to their affective narratives that together curate Filipinos' YouTube-mediated socio-technical world.

By closely examining Filipino YouTubers' creative, diverse, and affective contents and how these contents are strategically promoted and circulated, this book examines how YouTube is mediating Philippine modernity in the digital era. As such, this book raises several questions that problematise how YouTube becomes an important node in the digital and social life of Filipinos. We ask, what representations by YouTubers on different aspects of Philippine society are presented and curated on this digital space? How do cultural, historical, economic, and political influences inform the ways of interrogating representations and practices on YouTube? How do technological affordances and platform logics shape the production and circulation of content on the platform? What do representations and digital processes on YouTube reveal about the positionality of the Philippines and its citizens in a globalising and networked economy?

To address these questions, we deploy the lens of "brokerage" (Stovel & Shaw, 2012), particularly extending this frame in the context of digital media and communications. YouTubers, as online content producers, have been previously framed as micro-celebrities (Senft, 2008), influencers (Abidin, 2015), and cultural intermediaries (Hutchinson, 2017), and now, we consider them as "brokers" of relatable persona, lifestyle imaginaries, relationships, and mobility tactics. Thus, we examine the content on YouTube and the micro-celebrity strategies engaged by YouTubers, not just as mediated performances of Filipino everyday life, but as conditions where diverse

social transactions and aspirations of Filipinos are enacted, brokered, commodified, and negotiated.

In interrogating how online content creation is entangled with the platform's governance structures and broader economic, political, socio-historical, and technological conditions, we conceptualise YouTubers as brokers. Brokers similarly capitalise on micro-celebrity branding strategies to attract and engage audiences and generate profit, and use these and the platform's affordances to manufacture, sell, and "bridge" Filipinos to their economic, socio-cultural, and even political aspirations. As we will argue throughout the book, brokerage processes thrive within personally affective contents and strategic networks. Thus, the engagement of micro influencer strategies allows YouTube brokers to achieve a legitimate and relatable persona, put together disparate and useful relatable information as content, and facilitate affect and engagement crucial for the capturing of people's personal, economic, and political aspirations within the context of the platform's attention and business logics. This approach offers a critical focal point that widens our understanding of YouTube's growing role in the Philippines (specifically), but with potential relevance to other postcolonial societies (broadly).

Postcolonial Philippines in an Era of Neoliberal Globalisation

The Philippines provides a unique and interesting case study to critically examine the booming market of online content creation across the world. This lies in how socio-historical transformations have shaped the social, political, economic, and media terrain of the country. The Philippines is at the frontier of unprecedented changes influenced by the expansion of global markets, international relations and policies, as well as the advent of communication technologies. It is for these reasons that ordinary Filipinos have ventured into various opportunities, locally and internationally. However, these conditions are underpinned by the pre-existing hierarchy and divide in the nation-state, which favour and reinforce the privileged position of social, economic, and political elites. This, we argue, is crucial in analysing the conditions, practices, and outcomes of a networked, marketised and politicised environment of amateur online content producers.

As a start, we critically engage the Philippines' colonial past, which has been fundamental in setting the social, economic and political terrain that Filipinos navigate. Several Filipino scholars have argued that the current condition of the nation-state is deeply tied to a colonial history (Aguilar,

2014; Rafael, 2000; San Juan, 2011), highlighting that colonial legacy manifests in forms of domination, control, and marginalisation. For instance, racial and class hierarchies were reinforced during the Spanish regime. Colonisers and Filipinos with Spanish descent assumed privileged positions in the country, ascribing their whiteness to a social status, civility, and advancement (Rafael, 2000; Arnado, 2019). Indigenous Filipinos and dark-skinned individuals, meanwhile, were associated with barbarism (Rafael, 2000). This racial and skin colour discrimination have been deeply embedded in Philippine society, reflected in how Filipinos perceive standards of beauty, success, and upward mobility. Meanwhile, a different political, economic, and social life crystallised during the American rule, translating into new forms of domination and marginalisation. In contrast to the "divide and conquer" strategy of the Spaniards, the Americans deployed the tactic of "benevolent assimilation." In 1898, President William McKinley promoted paternalistic, family-oriented and affective relations between the U.S. and the Philippines (Aguilar, 2014). Filipinos were brought into the American education system, where they learned and practiced the English language and exposed to American culture and traditions. Scholars have pointed out that this immersion in the American education system has cultivated a neo-colonial consciousness in Filipinos, a privileging of the English language in education and professional communication and its recognition as the language of social elites, consumption of popular American media, and the performance of American traditions and cultures even after the American colonial period (Aguilar, 2014; Rafael, 2000). Notably, the deployment of the American education system in the Philippines also allowed for the exportation of trained Filipino nurses to the U.S. during and after World War II (WW2) (Aguilar, 2014). The U.S.-Philippine relations continued even after Philippine Independence in 1945 through sustained partnerships with U.S. officials, multinational companies, and transnational networks. These political and economic ties between the former colonisers and Philippine officials led to enduring hegemonic and colonial rule (Tadiar, 2004). For instance, U.S. troops remained in military bases in the Philippines even after the declaration of its independence, which sustained the prostitution of Filipino women and children in those communities (Tadiar, 2004). Ultimately, the positionality of colonial masters in the pedestal has been reinforced during the American period, most especially through benevolent assimilation.

By the 1960s, the Philippines fell into an economic crisis in the aftermath of WW2. Poverty, unemployment and underemployment worsened. Labelled as the "sick man of Asia," economic managers proposed the adoption of

structural adjustment policies. Former President Ferdinand Marcos turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) for loans (Aguilar, 2014). The Philippine government signed into international neoliberal policies such as the Washington Consensus, granting the U.S. a direct and indirect control of the Philippine economy (San Juan, 2009). This has led to the privatisation, deregulation, and liberalisation of various institutions and social welfare services, further undermining the unstable economic state of the country.

When large-scale labour emigration began in the 1970s, the economic conditions were worsened by the 1973 oil crisis (Asis, 2017). The economy could not keep pace with population growth, and the country needed to provide jobs and decent wages. To address the economic crisis, the Philippine government resorted to the further exportation of cheap and skilled labour through the Labour Export Policy (LEP) signed and issued under the Presidential Decree 422 in 1974 (San Juan, 2009). The labour code institutionalised overseas employment as a temporary-turned-permanent stopgap measure in addressing the country's economic problems (De Guzman, 2003). This paved the way for the creation of government institutions that oversee and manage the training and deployment of overseas Filipino workers, including the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA) and Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA). An overseas employment is aspired to by many Filipinos who lack access to social welfare services and work opportunities in the Philippines. According to the data produced by the POEA between 2015 and 2016, approximately 2.5 million Filipinos worked abroad, including 2 million land-based workers and 501 thousand sea-based workers (POEA, 2019). Although labour migration helps in supporting the accumulation of capitals needed by many Filipinos to escape poverty or support the education of left behind family members, it has many social costs, including physical abuse and inhumane living and working conditions for workers, as well as the disintegration of families (Rodriguez, 2010), Yet, despite its social costs, a significant portion of the local economy is driven by migrant remittances, which in turn also substantiates the economic benefits of labour exportation.

The migration trend has also activated the brokerage role of recruitment companies and informal actors that tapped diverse social networks and platforms to reach Filipinos, mostly women, who are aspiring for marriage migration. Along with the perception and aspiration that marrying a foreign partner can be a ticket to a more comfortable life, the growing statistics on marriage migration has caused anxieties about the welfare of Filipinos who marry foreign nationals through these transactions. A new law, RA10906

was enacted to strengthen the *Anti-Mail Order Bride Act of 1990*, and which considers the trafficking of Filipinos as brides or husbands through mail, in person, or over the Internet for the purpose of marriage or common law partnership. The problem with these state policies that are intended to address the welfare of Filipino migrants, however, is that local implementation mechanisms were often not in sync with national frameworks (Asis, 2017).

The Philippines reflects how a nation-state operates as a "broker" of cheap, surplus and exploited labour, engaging in neoliberal tactics on its conquest to address the nation's economic crisis (Rodriguez, 2010). Institutionalising this brokerage function is a web of social actors, offices, and institutions that facilitate the manufacturing of Filipino labour across the world (Guevarra, 2010; Rodriguez, 2010). Moreover, brokering is implemented by an oligarchic government, often adhering to colonialist and imperialist policies and generating more profit for those in power (Tadiar, 2004). Tadiar (2004) articulates the visions of the Philippine government for ordinary Filipinos as a "fantasy production" or an imagination that "is an intrinsic, constitutive part of the political economy" (p. 4). She writes:

> Fantasy production views the forms and dynamics of subjectivity produced and operating through contemporary international politics and economics, as emerging precisely out of dominant cultures of imperialism. Besides the orientalism in economics that persists in the world project of "development," logics of patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, and racism deeply inform and are generated by the practice of accumulation and power of postcolonial nation-states according to the tacit rules of the world system (p. 12).

Over the past years, the Philippine government has continued to broker Filipino workers to foreign markets (Guevarra, 2010; Rodriguez, 2010). The seamless exportation of human labour is well-established by the connections, control, and hierarchies wielded through policies during and after colonisation. Government and non-government institutions facilitate various training programs, serving as spaces for constant policing, monitoring and conformity to the ideal worker trope (Rodriguez, 2010). Overseas workers are encouraged to embody a certain subjectivity -- a supportive family member, a good citizen, or a competitive and entrepreneurial individual. These characteristics of an "ideal" overseas Filipino worker reflect a "neoliberal ethos" or sacrificing one's needs to provide for the family and the nation (Guevarra, 2010). This subjectivity is also promoted using mobile devices (Cabalquinto, 2014; Madianou & Miller, 2012) to fulfil duties and responsibilities to family

through sending remittances and consumer goods (Cabalquinto & Wood-Bradley, 2020; Guevarra, 2010; Rodriguez, 2010). Nonetheless, construction of Filipino subjectivity, mobility, and labour is shaped by neoliberal and neo-colonial influences.

The Philippines is also embracing neoliberal globalisation, which is characterised by keeping up with other nation-states' expanding markets and strategies for profit accumulation (A. Ong, 2006). One of its major structural adjustments is partaking in the knowledge economy. By definition, the knowledge economy is the expansion of production processes that facilitate the creation of information and ideas (Radhakrishnan, 2011). In the Philippines, the knowledge economy manifests in the rise of business processing outsourcing (BPO) companies that delegate management, coordination, and processing schemes to individuals. Significantly, the boom of the call centre and medical transcription industry has manifested a seismic turn in how the Philippine government addresses its surplus labour (David, 2016; Fabros, 2018). Based on available statistics, over half a million Filipinos were involved in the BPO industry in 2017 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2018), and the sector is a major contributor to the economy, projected to generate $29B in revenues in 2022 (IBPAP, 2020). Through BPO work, Filipinos do not leave the country but are compelled to imagine a foreign territory where they service their clients. Padios (2018) further notes that the competitive advantage of Filipinos in BPO work lies in their colonial roots, articulating the concept of Filipino/American relatability or the way the Philippines maintains its affinities and connections to the U.S. This concept demonstrates how Filipinos develop social capital and value through colonial legacies, which can also be negotiated when issues of racism and abuse emerge (Padios, 2018).

Like migrant workers, Filipinos in the BPO industry are described as "modern heroes" serving foreign clients, reducing unemployment, and bringing home much needed economic push, although this time not having to leave the country. Yet, although BPO work offers viable employment to many Filipinos such as acceptable pay, security of tenure, as well other benefits than their counterparts in the manufacturing and agricultural sectors, research has shown the physical and emotional burden experienced by local BPO workers. These included precarious working conditions characterised by long working hours, mental and emotional stress given the nature of work that required them to attend to irate customers on a daily basis, having to deal with constant night shifts, and mandatory overtime and holiday work (Fabros, 2016), among others.

More recently, the entanglement of technological innovations, further outsourcing of workers and services, and the widespread uptake of relatively

affordable digital communication technologies have contributed to other technologically mediated service work in the Philippines. This outcome has also been aligned with institutional support on improving the country's digital landscape. This includes the development of the national broadband policy and promotion of ICT-related jobs through its *digitaljobsPH* program.

The Philippine government's promotion of digital labour as a viable source of income becomes the penultimate and current neoliberal strategy to address its surplus labour and a growing informal economy. This happened alongside the trend towards flexibilisation of work arrangements brought upon market transformations in the Global North (Soriano & Cabañes, 2020a), and which led to planetary labour markets (Graham & Anwar, 2019) involving labour platforms that match workers and clients across the globe. Online platform labour proved to be a favoured alternative for many workers who started to experience discontent from the challenging conditions attached to BPO work as well as the worsening traffic conditions in the metropolis (Soriano & Cabañes, 2020a). Now the label of OFW—formerly pertaining to overseas Filipino workers, is attributed to digital workers too—as Online Freelance Workers 2.0. As "OFW 2.0," Filipinos explore cloudwork platforms such as Upwork or Onlinejobs.ph that match them with overseas clients for dollar earnings. As we will show in the succeeding chapters, platform workers and emerging influencers join the government in the avid promotion and normalisation of platform labour as a viable employment alternative across social media. However, online freelance workers are not detached from difficulties and challenges, such as the constraints stirred by non-recognition of legibility of online work, overwork, isolation, limited potential for career advancement, lack of bargaining capacity, and other challenges connected to navigating the ambiguous platform environment (Soriano & Cabañes, 2020a, 2020b). It is through this point that Soriano and Cabañes (2020a) raise the issues surrounding how the Philippine government brands online freelance workers as "world-class workers" while eliding the deep-seated structural inequalities in the national labour economy.

Anchored with considering digital technologies as a site for economic gains, Filipinos' capacity to capitalise on available digital opportunities beyond the state's brokerage role has expanded. Aside from being platform workers, Filipinos are also actively creating monetisable content and marketing products as entrepreneurs on social media platforms such as YouTube, while reviving old tensions of opportunity and precarity marked by past labour arrangements. The labour facilitated by these "digital opportunities" also require new abilities and predispositions that its users need to

accumulate and convert capital, even as sometimes this paradoxically reinstates inequalities and anxieties (Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2018).

By mapping the transformations in Philippine history, we highlight the interplay of culture, expanding markets, technological advancements, and job insecurity and how it informs the process of labour, subjectivity, mobility, and marginalisation. Crucial in the entanglement of these elements is the process of how individual lives are tied to the country's colonial past that mediates the brokering of aspirations, mobility, labour, and even anxieties in modernisation, and which we discuss further in Chapter 2. In the next section, we discuss how the development of digital and mobile media in the Philippines builds the historical, cultural and social foundations of brokerage that manifest in online and social spaces like YouTube.

Digital Philippines

The explosion of digital technology and access opportunities ushered by some key global and local developments set the landscape for key transformations in digital communication in the Philippines. As Filipinos achieved greater geographical and social mobility along with the modernisation of Asian economies (Qiu, 2007), digital communication became more important than ever to cater to the sharp rise in informational, economic, social, and political demands of citizens. For instance, many Manila-based dwellers, for example, are local migrants from across the archipelago who moved to the city for employment aspirations (UNESCO, n.d.). Notably, the outward mobility from the regions and even the country for personal, familial and professional reasons enables separation but also creates imperatives for heightened digital connectivity. This condition is then addressed using mobile devices for sustaining relationships in a national (R. Pertierra et al., 2002) and transnational context (Madianou and Miller, 2012). Further, mobile phones also facilitate the enactment of identity, intimacy, and even political participation (R. Pertierra et al., 2002). In a non-proximate arrangement among Filipinos and their loved ones and social networks, digital devices facilitate the flows of goods, money and information, which mediate relationships, feelings, and aspirations. It is within this context of mobility, structure of social stratification, and a growing need to maintain personal, familial and even political connections that mobile and social media became popular.

Although the market for telecommunications in the country remains controlled by a few powerholders and connectivity one of the slowest in the

world (Ookla, 2020), the high uptake is connected to telecommunication companies' rapid marketing of its products and services to tap the mobile Filipino market base with schemes attuned to the differing consumption capacities of Filipinos. There are two major telecommunication firms in the Philippines, including Globe Telecom and Philippine Long-Distance Telephone (PLDT). The latter owns two mobile communication companies, Sun Cellular and Smart Communications (previously known as Red Mobile). Globe Telecom and PLDT have been in competition in the local telecommunications market, although this might change as a third telecommunication company, DITO Telecommunity, was just given franchise by the Philippine government (Camus, 2019). Both PLDT and Globe sell a wide range of mobile Internet plans to accommodate a fast and changing market. More recently, mobile Internet is driven by the marketability of local brands that sell lower priced Android phones ranging from USD$25 to USD$300, such as *MyPhone, Cherrymobile, Starmobile,* and so forth. Post-paid telecommunications subscription offerings, along with the growing range of dealers, concept stores and kiosks spread across shopping malls and other public spaces that sell mobile devices with customisable features and software drive the tremendous mobile Internet market.

Telecommunication companies have been continuously reworking its products and services to suit the Philippine market across a broad income range. Crucial here is the offering of prepaid subscription, which caters to Filipinos from the lower to middle income classes, who experience the challenge of producing the requirements needed to open post-paid accounts. Prepaid sims with 4G or LTE Internet connectivity can be conveniently purchased for as little as USD$0.80 from the many convenience shops and variety stores spread across the country, and these sims are sometimes given away during company events or concerts. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), there were 167.32 million mobile-cellular telephone subscriptions in the Philippines in 2019 (ITU, 2020), effectively more than the population and which implies multiple subscriptions for some sectors of the population. Another popular feature is the introduction of features allowing the purchase of mobile credit through *tingi* [purchasing in small increments], as well as autoload/e-load (over-the-air purchase of credit) and *pasaload*/share-a-load (over-the-air sharing of credit) which were made readily available to poorer segments of the Philippine society through micro-entrepreneurs (Soriano, 2019). To date, the *tingi* approach has also been deployed in the use of the Internet, social media and mobile applications. For instance, both Globe and Smart Telecoms have prepaid and postpaid products that bundle these services, tiered in terms of its

combinations of texting, phone calls, and Internet packages (unlimited or capped to an amount or period), within and outside the networks, at home or mobile. Ultimately, these packages allow Filipinos to obtain "good enough access" (Uy-Tioco, 2019) to a range of online channels at home or on the go, depending on their capacity to pay. Smart and Globe, through their subsidiaries *Touch Mobile* and *Talk and Text* that target the lower-income market, now embed Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Viber, TikTok, and other apps in their promotions for free data and low-cost or "unlimited calls, text, and data bundles." In some cases, telecommunication companies and microentrepreneurs rolled out *pisonet* units (Soriano, Hjorth, & Davies, 2019) in urban and rural (often low-income) neighbourhoods. These are coin-operated public access points akin to a *videoke* or arcade machine that allow for accessing calculated Internet time (i.e. 4 minutes) for a peso for those who cannot own personal computers or mobile devices.

This proliferation of creative plans and marketing schemes aligned with the boom in social media platforms, leading Filipinos to engage in various online activities, such as watching online videos, listening to music streaming services, podcasts, online radio, and so forth leading to being awarded with different titles. The Philippines was earlier regarded as the "texting capital of the world" (R. Pertierra et al., 2002), as the "social networking capital of the world" in 2011 (Stockdale & McIntyre, 2011), as well as the "selfie capital of the world" in 2014 (Wilson, 2014) where citizens spend the highest number of hours on social media (at 6 hours and 43 minutes on average) everyday (We are Social, 2020).

The rise of digital innovations is spurring on new business models and applications that find a wide range of appropriations in a developing economy with a high level of communication skills and, ironically, social stratification (Lorenzana & Soriano, 2021). Ultimately, smart phones have become tools to sustain familial or friendly relations (R. Pertierra et al., 2002) as well as intimate relationships through dating apps (Cabañes & Collantes, 2020; Labour, 2020). It has also been used to sustain cultural identity and religious affinities (Ellwood-Clayton, 2005). Moreover, social media channels have been utilised to navigate and cope with the impacts of disasters (Crisostomo, 2020; David, Ong, & Legara, 2016; McKay & Perez, 2019). Globally, digital communication technologies have connected dispersed family members (Cabalquinto, 2018a, 2022; Madianou & Miller, 2012), offering ways of sustaining mothering roles, transnational fathering, as well as the fulfilment of filial obligations (Cabalquinto, 2018a, 2022; Cabañes, J. & Acedera, K., 2012; Parreñas, (2001); Uy-Tioco & Cabalquinto, 2020). Notably, the rise in the use of social media for political engagement and communication

is also growing, leading to the insertion of the struggles of minority and marginalised peoples in national narratives, while in turn also fuelling the populism that has gained international attention.

The continued growth of interactive applications reconfigures the Filipino consumer base as active and dynamic publics choosing from a range of communicative options and relational possibilities (Madianou & Miller, 2012) and as creators of content, seeking opportunities for heightened self-expression, recognition (Lorenzana, 2016), and attention (Cabalquinto & Soriano, 2020). Yet, these pose new questions and debates. One such issue that has emerged is the impact of digital technologies on cultural forms and expressions of identity, community, and nationhood (McKay, 2011; Crisostomo, 2020). Along with openings for creative and artistic expressions is also the rise of disinformation and populism (J. Ong & Cabanes, 2018; Curato, 2018), incivility and scandals (Lorenzana, 2021), cyberbullying, cancel culture, and influencer economies (Cabalquinto & Soriano, 2020) that have taken the country into uncharted political and social terrain. The opportunity to insert new voices into public conversations facilitated by spaces such as YouTube coincide with prejudice, bias, or hate. Further, communicative relations on social media are enacted as social, economic, and political transactions that are monetisable, feeding the capitalist ethos of capital accumulation, influence, and reputation (Athique, 2019). With the explosion of digital technology and access opportunities ushered by key global and local developments described above, digital communication in the country is heightened as it is commercialised through the conversion of every post and engagement into data and data as commodity form.

As discussed earlier, the Philippines' social and economic conditions are entangled with political structures and historical influences. Developments in digital communication and the conditions and structures align with colonialist dreamworks and fantasies. The next section elucidates how political, economic, and socio-historical factors shape the contours of the fast-evolving media ecosystem in the Philippines. This is of great importance especially in understanding and examining the practices, performativity, and politics of content creation as these evolve within a broader media ecosystem.

On/Off Air? From Mainstream to Online Media

Despite a growing number of studies on micro-celebrity in Asia (Abidin, 2015, 2016; Abidin & Brown, 2019) and in the Western world (Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2013; Poell, Neiborg & Duffy, 2022; Senft, 2008), little study has been made

on the flourishing presence of online content creators in the Philippines (Shtern, Hill, & Chan, 2019). Our research contextualises the representational politics of content produced by YouTubers in the Philippines, highlighting how texts and practices are shaped by and deeply tied to the Philippine's cultural, economic, political, and socio-historical domains. To understand the politics behind texts and mediated practices, we first map the media landscape in the Philippines. In particular, the high penetration of traditional media and particularly television in Philippine households, as well as the strong cultural influence of television programs in articulating values and aspirations among Filipinos, require examining how its functions are extended, sometimes replicated, and further expanded by content creators on YouTube.

The analysis of content creation in a visual medium such as YouTube necessitates a complementary understanding of the popularity of television in the Philippines. Philippine television, with its accessibility and cost friendliness, has been an iconic medium in Filipino households. It circulates contents that mediate Filipino values and aspirations. Yet, it also reflects the existing social differences and hierarchy in Philippine society. It is often populated and governed by the middle-class and elite Filipinos and mestiso/mestisas. As a business, Philippine television negotiates the social hierarchy by producing programs and contents that align with the interest, taste and even aspirations of the target audience, typically the *masa* or individuals belonging to lower income classes. Here, televisual spectacle is transformed into the blending of the upper and lower-class Filipinos in television formats (A. Pertierra, 2018), such as game shows, reality TV, and so forth. In examining the political and economic dimension of media and visual texts in the Philippines, scholars have deployed the lens of patron-client relations (J. Ong, 2015; A. Pertierra, 2018, 2021). This means that gestures, practices, and speeches are delivered by social actors in exchange for a wide range of capitals – social, economic, and political. A key work in Philippine media studies that articulates patron-client relations is by Anna Pertierra (2018). Her ethnographic study of a long-running noontime show, *Eat Bulaga*, unpacked how celebrities, who belong to the middle and upper class, can be one with the masses through performative acts and a range of gimmicks. Philippine television's dominant audience base belongs to lower-middle classes and the urban and rural poor. A. Pertierra (2018) argues that the masses, who were typically the market and the contestants of the show, express their experiences of poverty through stories of suffering as well as humour and mimicry embedded in the shows. This enables them to generate a sense of agency in the form of visibility as well as economic gains by

bringing home instant cash prizes. This negotiation of social differences is echoed in the ethnographic study of Jonathan Ong (2015) on how Philippine news and several game shows represent the suffering of poor Filipinos. Ong underscored how the everyday sorrows and suffering of ordinary Filipinos are common themes to attract audiences' attention and further engage advertisers and business enterprises. By interviewing producers and journalists, J. Ong (2015) unpacked the tensions between the intersections of economics and morality in broadcast journalism, highlighting how the spectacle of suffering is often utilised to articulate the deservingness of aid and even airtime.

The practices of Philippine television essentially show how emotionally charged stories have become valuable, palatable and profitable contents. But more importantly, both studies of A. Pertierra (2018) and J. Ong (2015) also highlighted the ways through which various capitals are mobilised in Philippine television. More specifically, the visibility of television hosts in helping the masses on national television becomes potent mechanisms for admiration among masses, which can eventually translate to popularity or campaign support and electoral votes for celebrities who run for public office (A. Pertierra, 2017). For the former, visibility can lead to multi-million contracts, product endorsements, international tours, and so forth. For the latter, several Filipino celebrities, such as Tito Sotto, Bong Revilla, Noli De Castro, Vilma Santos, Joseph Estrada, and many more, have eventually occupied key positions in government, including the Presidency, Vice Presidency, Senate, and Congress. Ultimately, entertainment media stirs political capital (R. Pertierra, 2020; A. Pertierra, 2020), which is enabled by patron-client relations or how connections and affiliations to certain personalities can offer access to upward social mobility.

A patron-client relation also reinforces power structures in Philippine television. The experience of poverty is marked by representations in the media and the consumption of a range of media contents (A. Pertierra, 2018; J. Ong, 2015), which are appropriated for monetisation. In Philippine entertainment media, celebrities and their networks direct participants to act, dance, sing, laugh or display their uncanny talents while offering solace through instant gifts or cash prizes, underlining the marginalised status of the guests and the role of the media networks in facilitating empowerment. This same trope – that economic hardship can be alleviated through opportunities provided by the media and in particular through "getting discovered" – is a recurring feature of teledramas and movies too, and as we will show in this book, resonate in many YouTube videos as well. Yet, entertainment and visibility does not necessarily undermine or change

systems that produce inequalities. As A. Pertierra (2018) emphasises: "But this increased access to material abundance in no way overcomes – and in some cases rather continues to emphasise the marginal or subaltern status of these groups" (p. 2). Ultimately, the affective performances and the consequent access to capital facilitated by Philippine television indicates that the media is challenging but also perpetuating hierarchical structures. As to be presented in this book, we showcase how an online video-based platform such as YouTube becomes an extension of these negotiations of social differences in the Philippines.

The middle class, elites, and politicians take the media stage, taking advantage of the active presence of ordinary Filipinos to advance political agendas and commercial gains. These individuals are privileged in their position because of their access to diverse capitals and their strategies for maintaining their position. So with the boom of digital communication technologies, Filipinos are ushered into a new space that offers possibilities yet also reinforces domination and marginalisation. The online space serves as a melting pot for crafting aspirations, anxieties, frustrations, and accessing resources that remain inaccessible in Philippine society. However, to date, limited studies have been conducted to examine the emerging media practices of ordinary Filipinos utilising online media channels to broadcast their lives (Shtern et al., 2019). It is through this gap that our book intervenes.

In the first instance, we build on existing studies that have highlighted how patron-client relations sustain the "harmonious" dynamics of different and class-based individuals (J. Ong, 2015; A. Pertierra, 2018). In online spaces, Filipinos who use online channels typically benefit from a patron-client engagement, as reflected in the form of exchanging recommendations, advice, and networking. They capitalise on affective and personalised storytelling to sustain social connections among their networks as well as translate interactions to platform-based profits in the forms of subscription, likes, views and shares. What the current media and digital environment in the Philippines shows is that ordinary Filipinos have been given access to broadcasting tools such as YouTube to curate, produce, circulate, and monetise their own content. These individuals contribute to what A. Pertierra (2021) calls, "entertainment publics" or "comedic, melodramatic and celebrity-led content" that generate "networks of followers, users and viewers whose loyalty produces various forms of capital, including in notable cases political capital" (p. 2). Through the mainstreaming of relatively affordable smartphones, accessibility of mobile social media and applications, as well as filming tools and software, an ordinary Filipino – as an influencer – can partake in practices of visibility and curation, while weaving aspirations

and capitalising on monetisation possibilities afforded by the platform. The brokering then happens when their stories and affective performativity are produced, circulated, and consumed in a networked environment. Yet, the contradiction of occupying an online space is the reinforcement of market logics and an internalised neo-colonial mentality. For this study, we refer to the role of a video-based channel, YouTube, to expose the paradoxical conditions enabled by the digitalisation of Filipinos' lives in a neoliberal and postcolonial context.

YouTubing the Philippines: The Analytic Lens of Brokerage

This book focuses on YouTube as a locus for producing and circulating distinct creative, personalised, networked, commodified, and postcolonial contents. In this section, we highlight why it is important to study YouTube in the context of the Philippines, and what significance this offers in understanding how individuals navigate the impacts of neoliberal and colonialist globalisation in the digital age. Further, our study offers the lens of brokerage as a critical perspective for examining the paradoxes surrounding representational practices in the neoliberal and marketised space of YouTube. The key aspects of "digital brokering" will be discussed in Chapter 2.

From its inception, YouTube has promoted and capitalised on encouraging users to engage in authentic self-expression and community building. Originally, it was introduced as an online tool that allows "ordinary individuals" (Strangelove, 2010) to broadcast their lives and demonstrate ways of cultural and personal expressions (Burgess & Green, 2018). At the time when YouTube was launched, popular genres of content involved banal, personalised, and vernacular creativity (Burgess & Green, 2018). Here, Strangelove (2010) has highlighted that "extraordinary" videos made by ordinary people typically captured personal and domestic exchanges. Strangelove considered YouTubing as a form of domesticated media practice, historicising how family members utilise a camera to capture, curate and archive everyday familial content.

Now, we see the rapid growth of diverse, multicultural, amateur and professional content creators from around the world who harness these platforms to develop and promote their own brands, engage in content innovation, and cultivate communities and followers. YouTube has brought into the fore the diverse creative content of cultural interest that were previously relegated to the intimate or private domain, such as beauty,

eating, cooking, mothering, and other aspects of domestic and intimate life often shot through amateur videos (Burgess & Green, 2009; Cunningham, 2012; Kumar, 2016). From its minority and alternative media roots (Jenkins, 2006), YouTube has given rise to a wide user-created content community, and also now considered to be an important site for amateurs, micro-celebrities, small entrepreneurs, and even large companies for pushing their content for wide exposure and with monetary benefits. In light of the relatively frictionless global reach of various forms of "social media entertainment" such as YouTube (Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Cunningham) and the growing genre of YouTube videos that convey multiple aspects of everyday life, it is important how even for many Filipinos, "especially young viewers, this is what television is, now" (Craig, & Silver, 2016, p. 71).

While YouTube may be experienced as television for many, the platform brings in affordances that present unique forms of engagement with its users. Beyond the affordances of content creation and sharing, it is the networked connectivity of YouTube that has also paved the way for generating a sense of connectivity among its users, which also works for facilitating the potency of its content (Burgess, 2011). YouTube's architecture and design interface facilitates social interactions and connection among content creators (Burgess & Green, 2009; Lange, 2014), as well as among subscribers, fans, and visitors (García-Rapp, 2017; Lange, 2014). Amateur video production establishes connections and relationships among individuals on YouTube (Lange, 2009), while spoofs, parody and viral videos further encourage participation among larger audiences (Burgess, 2008). The online space has enabled confessions and coming out videos (Alexander & Losh, 2010) as well as launching political commentaries and advocacy campaigns via video mashups (Edwards & Tryon, 2009). Moreover, video blogs have mobilised individual expression and harness a space for collective and cultural expressions (Chu, 2009). Prominently, beauty vloggers capitalise on deploying intimate narratives and tutorials to increase viewership and generate profit (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). YouTubers also exploit key features of YouTube, such as encouraging viewers to hit the subscribe button or click the notification bell to establish connections with subscribers and viewers. The YouTube live feature affords the elicitation of audience engagement in real time, right when stories or issues are at their peak. With YouTube live, YouTubers have the opportunity to become "live broadcasters," (Soriano & Gaw, 2021) where they can give "shoutouts" to acknowledge their viewers and read their comments and questions aloud – a feature common in Philippine TV and radio broadcasts. YouTube's affordances allow content creators to blend TV, radio, and social media, producing content that is not

restricted by the limitations of bandwidth or airtime while maximising audience-engagement strategies to make these content more dynamic and affective. Through this culture of content creation, circulation and engagement, YouTube becomes the anchor for different forms of cultural and associational expression among diverse publics (Cunningham, 2012; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Its multiple affordances offer many possibilities for users to cluster around video content and channels across different topics and genres, including racialised, gendered, and class-based narratives (Strangelove, 2010).

Significantly, YouTube's transformation has also been informed by the operations of business models and data governance. Through partnership programs, individual users are afforded with the ability to monetise popular content (Burgess, 2011; van Dijck, 2013). This program complemented how media corporations have begun utilising YouTube as an alternative channel for distributing content, which then generated criticisms from amateur video producers who consider YouTube as a democratised, open, and alternative space for cultural production (Burgess & Green, 2009). In some cases, YouTube is criticised for promoting authenticity, vernacular creativity, and community-building following market logics (Burgess, 2015; Burgess & Green, 2009). As Burgess and Green (2009) note:

> YouTube is, and has always been, a commercial enterprise. But it has always been a platform designed to enable cultural participation. Despite all the complexity of its professional media ecology, the inclusiveness and openness of the YT promise that "anyone" can participate is also fundamental to its distinctive commercial value proposition. This is what we mean when we say that, for YouTube, participatory culture is core business. (p. 123)

This book approaches YouTube both as a storehouse of cultural expressions and a platform.

It serves as a tool for forging and maintaining personal and social connections. It allows individual users to present and curate their everyday experiences, movements, and social interactions and enact multiple ways of being and aspiring. Online performativity and interactions reflect what Burgess (2007) refers to as "vernacular creativity" or practices that capture the intimate, mundane, creative, and playful activities of individuals. Notably, as YouTube affords monetisation, individual users have also begun using the platform to generate profit. In this vein, amateur content creators transition to become influencers. These individuals deploy a range of communicative

strategies to develop and sustain a connection between oneself and the audience (Abidin, 2015; Duffy, 2017). Utilising performative and affective narratives (Berryman & Kavka, 2017) has become a key branding strategy (Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2013), which also raises concerns on constantly juggling being authentic vis-à-vis crafting a certain persona that meets the demands of the audience or a corporate brand (Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2013). These strategies also involve varieties of "affective labour" (Berryman & Kavka, 2017) that go into producing such displays. This is especially notable given the blending of private life experiences into the construction of videos and in the process of sustaining a community of followers on social media. Where YouTubers expose their own vulnerabilities and personal successes into their branding strategies, they also emotionally expose their own aspirations and emotions, crucial to achieve and sustain authenticity on the platform and "cement ties of intimacy" with their followers (Berryman & Kavka, 2017, p. 96). This includes the "relational labour" or the effort that goes into and beyond managing others' feelings and maintaining connections that can consequently boost one's earning potential, and which pertains to the "complementary dialectics of personal relationships and professional labour" playing out in the ever-changing flow of everyday interaction on social media (Baym, 2015).

To date, YouTube, operating its partnership programs on a global scale, is primarily considered a platform that capitalises on its interface technology, data governance, algorithms, and business models. This book then asks, what do we know about YouTube in the context of the Global South and the Philippines in particular? What types of content are produced and circulated in an online space? What do online processes and content reveal about the ways the Philippines navigates a digitally mediated and global economy? In responding to these questions, we propose brokerage as an analytical lens.

We anchor our conception of brokerage to the fast-evolving relations between systems, markets, institutions, and digitalisation. Brokerage is defined as "the process of connecting actors in systems of social, economic, or political relations in order to facilitate access to valued resources" (Stovel et al. 2011, p. 141). This conceptualisation complements the propositions surrounding the practices of micro-celebrities, influencers or cultural intermediaries, individuals who often act as middle person between a brand, private and government institutions, and audiences. However, our conception of brokering is expansive, situated, and reflexive, highlighting how representations and practices in digital spaces are deeply linked to consequences of historically-situated economic globalisation. As we have shown earlier, media practices in the Philippines are informed by hierarchical

structures that are created and reinforced by the logics of markets, neoliberal ethos, and colonial influences, and which all work to sustain the operation of brokers. By identifying the diverse and often intertwined factors that shape the types of content and affective performances online, we locate how the ordinary Filipino is visibilised and positioned in a digital realm. As to be presented in this study, we focus on the affective content and digital strategies that reflect the mechanisms of brokerage as both, echoing the words of Duffy (2017), practice and ideology.

By engaging the lens of brokerage in the context of YouTube, we seek to illuminate the desires and aspirations enabled and bridged by content reference, cultures, and practices of Filipino YouTubers. More than exposing the diverse, personalised, and localised digital practices, this book takes into consideration the overarching historically situated political and economic forces that inform media representations and practices. In this vein, YouTube is not only approached as a platform. Rather, it is examined as an intermediary or broker of economic, political, and social goals and aspirational lifestyles through the ways YouTubers perform, broadcast and monetise everyday life in a postcolonial state. As a form of networked brokering, we show how YouTubing subverts and reinforces ideal subjectivities, intimate relations, labour practices, and political expressions within a neoliberal and postcolonial domain. As our case studies unfold in the succeeding chapters, we aim to provide a critical entry point in analysing the impact of digitalisation on the everyday life of individuals who remain neglected and even exploited by the nation-state in a globalising and networked economy.

Methodological Approach

Online videos are considered textual trails in an online space, and media texts can be analysed as cultural expressions with interpretive meanings shaped by diverse contexts. We build on earlier works employing discursive textual analysis of visual texts on social media (Banet-Weiser 2011, Dobson, 2015; Holmes, 2016; Jancsary et al., 2016, pp. 180–204; García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017; Strangelove, 2010) to examine the "recurrent narrative and aesthetic structures" embedded in the videos, including a focus on "temporal organization, editing, image, sound" (Holmes, 2016, p. 7), as well as branding strategies (Abidin, 20015; Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Duffy, 2017) employed by the content creator. We examine this orchestration of visual elements and communicative strategies that constitute a particular social reality

embedded in text while also situated in a specific cultural context and dynamics of the platform.

This book is based on collecting and analysing selected YouTube videos by amateur content creators promoting a range of aspirations – white skin, interracial relationship, world-class labour, and progressive political governance. YouTube hosts millions of videos of a broad range of themes. We chose these four topics for our case studies because we felt they represented a spectrum of aspirations brokered on YouTube ranging from beauty and self-esteem (skin whitening), intimacy and social mobility (interracial relationship), economic opportunity (online freelancing and digital labour), and nation-building and progress (politics and governance). These four themes also pertain to different subjectivities: a feminised identity, a romantic partner, a world-class worker, and a patronising citizen, that encompass the multiple facets of the Filipinos' emplacement in global modernity. We used Google Trends to identify commonly searched keywords for each theme [i.e. *pampaputi ng kilikili* (underarm whitening) for skin whitening, "LDR" for interracial relationship, "online freelancing" for digital labour, and so forth]. In identifying videos for analysis, we selected amateur videos, excluding videos that are produced by professional institutions or media organisations. Because we are capturing amateur content creators who have amassed significant influence on the platform, the search results were filtered in terms of views and channel subscribership (Altmaier et al., 2019), and specifically those with above 1,000 subscribers and 4,000 hours of accumulated watch time for the past 12 months, which is YouTube's requirement for monetising content on its platform. From the resulting amateur videos and channels emerging from our search with the highest views and subscriptions, we closely examined the videos' aspirational content, discursive styles, community and credibility building strategies, and platform engagement tactics. To identify the aspirational tropes and strategies, we used thematic analysis (Flick, 2011) to surface emerging themes that are then discursively analysed in terms of how these aspirations are underpinned by gendered, racialised, classed, and postcolonial realities. Conducting a critical analysis of the videos unravelled the tropes in relation to the brokerage of aspirations embedded in content production and engagement practices on YouTube (García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017; Lange, 2009). However, in the process of our analysis, we attempted to get beyond the level of particular examples or themes, and to gain some perspective on YouTube as a mediated cultural system (Burgess & Green, 2018) and its role in the everyday lives of Filipinos. There are some methodological variations in each chapter. For example, thematic analysis was complemented by interviews with some influencers

for Chapter 5. An expanded discussion of the methods is presented in each chapter. The project obtained ethics approval from De La Salle University (DLSU-FRP.013.2019-2020.T2.CLA).

Organisation of the Book

This book has seven chapters, including this one, which characterise the social, economic, political, and technological transformations surrounding the brokerage of aspirations in neoliberal and postcolonial Philippines on YouTube. In Chapter 2, we present the theoretical framework of the research project. It extends the concept of brokerage in the digital realm, embedding brokering practices within existing social, economic, political, and historical conditions. Rather than emphasising brokering only as a strategy deployed by the Philippine government in response to globalised capitalism (Rodriguez, 2010), we argue that brokering operates as a result of deep internalisation and constant negotiation of individuals who perceive YouTube as a fundamental source of investment, mobility, networks, and capital. We problematise brokering through the lens of postcolonialism, emphasising how being a global and tech-savvy Filipino citizen becomes a marker of potential, imagined, or actual upward and networked mobility among ordinary citizens. Although an online space like YouTube can imply a democratisation of communicative capacities, we also identify YouTube as a contested site, in which individuals negotiate conditions of social mobility and immobility, progress and precarity, and belonging and exclusion.

Chapter 3 explores the role of YouTube in enabling YouTubers to aspire and embody a white subjectivity. More specifically, it presents how Filipina YouTubers promote underarm whitening as an everyday, banal yet critical practice in enabling an ideal femininity and beauty. We approach the broadcast of underarm whitening as a form of a temporary "cultural whitening" or wanting to be white. As a form of colour consciousness, having a white or fair skin is shaped by Philippine colonial history. Here, whiteness is ascribed with privilege, social status, civility, and upward mobility. Of particular interest in this chapter is a discussion on how the visibility of Filipina women and their skin whitening practices signal a postfeminist subjectivity – enacting empowerment through digital, neoliberal and entrepreneurial practices. Ultimately, an examination of content on underarm whitening demonstrates the brokering of ideal standards of feminised and racialised subjectivity, the visibility of which generates imaginaries and aspirations for attractiveness and marketability in and beyond online spaces.

Chapter 4 unpacks the brokering of interracial and mediated intimacies on YouTube. We focus on the curated stories of Filipina YouTubers who met their intimate partners via online channels. Analysed as an extension of marriage migration brokerage enacted by formal or informal recruitment agents, we show how YouTube becomes a site for the performance of interracial intimacy while cascading imaginaries, aspirations, and importantly, know-how, of finding a white foreign partner and achieving a successful interracial and intimate relationship. As a form of embodying cultural whitening through marriage and eventually having a mixed-race child, intimate narratives broker the notions of an intimate, authentic, and happy relationship. Paradoxically, the stories of Filipina YouTubers serve as "countererotics" or the challenging of the sexualised representation of Filipino women in an interracial relationship. Yet, representational politics can remain especially when performativity reinforces gendered subjectivity – a woman who is idealised as caring and domesticated. Further, it is also this gendered performativity that is commodified in an online space. In a way, performing intimate and interracial relations indicate a postfeminist subjectivity, as reflected in investing in digital practices to commodify and broker gendered, racialised, and intimate encounters and aspirations.

Chapter 5 underscores how YouTube is engaged as a platform for mediating digital labour through "skill-selling." Through interviews with platform workers and analysis of "skill-making" content on YouTube, the chapter presents YouTube as a space where YouTubers can showcase their capabilities to obtain a captive market and attain celebrity status as "global knowledge workers." Using YouTube provides an opportunity for digital labour influencers and skill-makers to deliver training to aspiring platform workers who seek to earn dollars while working at home, while also crafting imaginaries and ideals of success in the platform economy. In effect, YouTubers, through the brokerage of skills and promotion of the viability of digital labour, perform the role of local matchmaker between aspiring workers and digital labour platforms. Situated within the frames of the gig economy, this chapter offers a critical insight on digital and flexible labour in the Global South and the role of YouTube in brokering labour relations and economic aspirations.

Chapter 6 examines how YouTube facilitates the brokering of a political agenda through historical revisionism. We analyse the content and strategies of YouTubers advancing revisionist narratives about the brutal history of Martial Law under former and authoritarian President Ferdinand Marcos, as a pathway for the cleansing of the Marcos legacy and in preparation for the campaign of Marcos' son, Ferdinand (Bongbong) Marcos, Jr,. as President of the Republic. Considered as political brokers, YouTubers take advantage

of the platform's affordances and porous governance structures by creating content and a network that build, propagate, and cement their political narratives without being subjected to the same scrutiny of and by traditional gatekeepers. The crass online performativity of political brokers is utilised to broker national aspiration of progress and economic security patterned after the West. We argue that democracy can be threatened and undermined especially when a profit-driven and emotionally laden propaganda re-casts a turbulent political history by staging a mythic agentic space for online supporters. Through the lens of brokering, we can hypothesise how Philippine politics will be further reconfigured by new faces created and influenced by an ongoing production and circulation of unregulated disinformation content on YouTube.

Concluding this book is a discussion on some of the key contentions on brokering feminised subjectivity, interracial relations, world-class labour, and partisan politics. The closing chapter also leaves the readers with some future research directions, including ways of rethinking YouTubing as a form of platformisation of everyday life in the Global South. Significantly, at the centre of this chapter is a critical reflection on the contradictions of a digital life in the Philippines. It does not only reiterate the affordances and possibilities that are activated through engagement with social media (broadly) and YouTube (specifically). It also emphasises the ruptures and tensions that YouTubers have to constantly manage as reflected in their affective performativity, networked engagement, and strategic online content creation. We argue that navigating a digital terrain is understood as symptomatic of the inequalities produced through the broader systems of neoliberalism and colonial legacy in the Philippines. Within the frames of a global economy and further flexibilisation and informality of work, the individual becomes responsible for his or her own undertaking given the lack of available government-run social welfare programs and public services, and the challenges of navigating information amid the complexity of local and foreign bureaucracies. However, through YouTube, the individual can position oneself as an entrepreneurial and global persona or obtain imaginaries of possibility to thrive and achieve their aspirations. Paradoxically, engagement in an online space is co-opted for commercial interests and even partisan politics. Nonetheless, we propose a much-needed critical lens to investigate how a personalised, creative, and playful space for self-expression and community building may obscure the often-invisible injuries of economic globalisation.

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