

Negotiations in the Gendered Experiences of Transpinay Entertainers in Japan

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Among Filipino entertainers in Japan, trans women (transgender women) or transpinay (Filipino trans woman) entertainers remain understudied compared to cisgender women. Though the number of entertainers has declined, transpinay entertainers remain relevant as transgender issues continue to be salient globally. This study explains the gendered experiences of the transpinay migrants, particularly in entertainment work and their relationships, which are different from cisgender Filipino women entertainers' experiences. Using grounded theory and drawing on concepts of performativity in interactions to analyze the narratives of transpinay entertainers, I delve into how transpinay entertainers negotiate their gender and migrant identities as they establish professional and personal relationships. Moreover, the transpinays' entertainment work is a significant contributing factor to their sense of belonging in Japan, as they form relationships with colleagues, clients, and partners who support them and, thereby, sustain their lifestyles as trans women. The transpinay entertainers' flows of migration between Japan and the Philippines reveal that they embrace various aspects of social remittances and use them to their advantage to create and enhance their transpinay identity in Japan. By examining the transpinays' migrant experiences, this study aims to elucidate the gendered experiences of transpinay entertainers, which involve significant negotiations in their migration pathways notably different from cisgender Filipino women entertainers, reveal resilience.

Keywords: migration, Filipino trans women, transpinay, entertainers, negotiating identity, gender performativity

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1. Introduction

For (us) trans, Japan was considered a paradise.

—Fumi, entertainer in the 1980s

The paradise that Fumi describes above, refers to her migration experience during Japan's bubble economy. The 1980s–early 2000s saw a peak of transpinay entertainers living and working in this host country. Fumi's statement confirms a similar view of Japan-as-paradise expressed by transgender hostesses interviewed by Parreñas (2011). These entertainers described Japan as "*paraiso ng mga bakla*," meaning paradise for gay men because "men really fall in love with them for not being women" (Parreñas, 2011, p. 86). However, for my participants, Japan as a paradise also signified the fulfillment of their dreams, such as gaining financial rewards and feeling safe as transgender women. As transpinay entertainers navigate their migration pathways, they create and negotiate their gender and migrant identities.

In this article, I seek to answer this question: How are the gendered experiences in work and relationships of transgender Filipino women different from the cisgender women entertainers in Japan? Since the Filipino migrants continue to constitute a significant population of foreign migrants in Japan and there is a need to raise awareness of transgender issues, I hope to contribute this study to the expanding scholarship of transgender and migration studies.

From the 1980s to 2000s, labor migration and the Japanese government's entertainer visa paved the way for many Filipinos to be hired as cultural performers (Faier, 2007) and contract laborers with three- to six-month stints in Japan's nightlife industry (Parreñas, 2010). In 2004, the U.S. Department of State published the "Trafficking in Persons Report," which included Japan's entertainer visas. As a result, the Japanese government applied stricter regulations for entertainer visas, drastically decreasing the number of entertainers (Chung, 2015).

A Filipina or Filipino woman going to Japan was commonly labeled a *Japayuki* (also known as Japan-bound or Ms. Go Japan). Although this term had a derogatory connotation and generally referred to cisgender women, most Japayukis had a common goal: to rise above the lack of opportunities in their home country by seeking greener pastures in Japan to financially provide for their loved ones. For transgender women Japayukis, the reasons for relocating were somewhat different.

Trans women have been employed in entertainment spaces in Japan since the mid-20th century. Mitsuhashi (2005) described in depth the history and development of transgender entertainment in Japan. Transgender women performers started in floor shows in the mid-1950s, gay bars in the early 1970s, pubs in the 1980s, and finally, as transgender talents in modern

Japanese media. In the 1980s, feminised men were widely discussed in the media, so *nyūhāfu* (trans women) clubs became popular among patrons seeking “feminised men who could capitalize on their feminine attributes” (Ishida & Murakami, 2006, unpagged). Descriptions of this type of entertainment work included no mention of Filipino transgender entertainers. Parreñas (2010), however, described the Filipino transgender performance during the *sayonara*, or the last night of work at the club, which was more spectacular than at the cisgender women clubs.

These entertainment spaces often carried strong expectations for transgender entertainers in terms of gender performance. A club’s marketability of the Filipino transgender hostesses could be estimated by the degree of their femininity, even for those who had not undergone surgery. Unlike the cisgender women hostesses, transgender hostesses tended to invest in cosmetic surgery to look more feminine and have Japanese facial features such as more pointed slanted eyes (Parreñas, 2010). These practices indicate that heteronormative and nonheteronormative entertainers present contrasting gender performances. This paper seeks to identify and explain the transpinay migrants’ negotiation of their identity in Japan, an experience different from Filipino heteronormative migrants.

Transgender identity and experiences are embedded in linguistic expressions. Filipinos frequently address the trans woman as *bakla* or *bading*, which translates to English as “cross-dresser” or “transvestite” instead of “transgender woman.” Distinctions among *bakla*, gay, and trans are further convoluted by socioeconomic class (David, 2015). In the last two decades, the Philippines has gradually started to adopt the universal concept of transgender. Many Filipinos started to use the words “gay” and “transgender” to differentiate between sexuality and gender as well as to depart from the category of *bakla* (David, 2015). New hybrid terms such as *transpinay* (Filipino trans woman) or *transpinoy* (Filipino trans man) have emerged in recent years. Considering the cultural implications, translations, and other complexities of gender terminologies in Filipino, English, and Japanese has been difficult at times for my study.

My intention to minimize labels that may be perceived as offensive and segregated by social class or age has compelled me to explore the meanings of gender terms to redefine them on the basis of my research participants’ distinct migration experience. Due to the overlap of Filipino, Japanese, and Anglophone definitions, as well as slippages in how to use gender terminologies, I propose the term *transpinay*—already used within the Filipino LGBTQ community—to refer to the Filipino transgender women in my study². The Society of Transsexual Women of the Philippines (STRAP) coined this term (Alegre, 2018) in the mid-2000s, which I propose to adapt to a different context in my study. Trans—originally signifying only transgender or transsexual—

² The terms, *bakla*, *bading*, and *newhalf* are still used sporadically as indicated by my participants to refer to themselves and other *transpinay* entertainers.

becomes, in this context, transmigrant and transnational as well as transgender, while the second half of the word, *pinay*, is an English/Tagalog word meaning Filipino woman (Okada, 2020).

This paper first reviews the existing literature on Filipino entertainers, the Filipino LGBTQ migrants, Filipino trans women, and gender performativity. After explaining my methodology, findings and discussions on negotiations lead to my conclusion that the migration experiences of the transpinay entertainers reveal resilience and are different from the cisgender women entertainers in Japan.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gendered Filipino Entertainers in Japan

Narratives of Filipino cisgender women entertainers have dominated the discussion of labor migration in Japan (Ballescás, 1992; Faier, 2007; Parreñas, 2011; Suzuki, 2008, 2011; Tyner, 2013). Yu-Jose (2007) reports the changes in the occupations of Filipinos from musicians to entertainers. According to Yu-Jose, American managers and promoters introduced Filipino musicians to Japan beginning in the 1920s, through the American invasion of Okinawa in the late 1940s, and up until the 1960s. Tracking the stories of early Filipino entertainers who introduced jazz and boxing to the Japanese, Suzuki (2008) demonstrates how the experiences of various Filipino entertainers are linked to both history and power relations. Once, these highly respected professional entertainers were seen as representatives of the Americans. Suzuki argues that Filipino migrants to Japan came to be recognized as “feminized” workers. Women migrants, Suzuki explains, have since been stereotyped as “sex workers” and “victims of trafficking,” while the boxers have been seen as “losers” (p. 67). Suzuki shows how both female and male entertainers are perceived as possessing “feminine” attributes of weakness, inferiority, moral degradation, caring, adaptability, and subservience” (p. 67). Furthermore, the representations of Japayuki entertainers that have been produced, consumed, and desired are propagated by the transnational middle class, including the Filipino elite who have created these feminized and sexualized images (Suzuki, 2011, p. 440).

Filipino entertainers, mostly women, migrated to mainland Japan for economic reasons (Ballescás, 1992) when the Japanese sex tourism in Asia was at its peak during the 1970s and 1980s (Docot, 2009). This internationalization of the sex industry shaped Filipina women's image as working solely for the yen, whether as an entertainer or as a Japanese man's wife (Sellek, 1996). However, like other women from developed countries, these women may have also migrated because of “manifestations of pervasive gender-sexual regimes and oppression” (Suzuki, 2011, p. 454) during pre-migration. Similar to the transpinay entertainers in my study, their several motives for migration compounded; Filipino entertainers did not generally migrate for economic reasons alone.

Since the 1980s, Filipino workers have served as bar hostesses, whose job functions did not include commercial sex; instead, they were tasked with performing dance routines, singing and dancing with male clients, and creating a relaxing atmosphere by engaging customers in light conversations. However, there have been hostesses involved in sex work (Suzuki, 2011).

The U.S. "Trafficking in Persons Report" in 2004 problematically recognized many entertainers, including Filipino women, as sex workers being trafficked illegally. Thus, the number of entertainer visas issued to Filipinos dropped from 80,000 in 2004 to 6,000 in 2007 (Asahi Newspaper, October 17, 2008, as cited in Yokoyama, 2010). Parreñas (2011) conducted her fieldwork as a hostess to document whether Filipina migrant entertainers in Tokyo were trafficked. Although hostessing was not the preferred job for Filipina migrants, they considered performing as entertainers in Japan morally acceptable.

The experiences of transpinay entertainers in Japan have not been mapped out yet, as revealed in the summarized discussions of Filipino LGBTQ migration and the gendered entertainers in Japan. Little is known of their lives before working in Japan. Unlike most cisgender women entertainers, transgender women have faced stigma related to their gender identity in their homeland. Transgender entertainers have a migration trajectory distinct from the cisgender entertainers in Japan, as I will explain in the succeeding sections.

2.2 Filipino LGBTQ Migration and Filipino Trans Women

Following Carrillo (2004), studying sexual migration suggests not only from a theoretical perspective focused on immigration and sexuality but also through the lens of globalization, transnationality, and cultural hybridity. Manalansan (2003) focuses on the diverse narratives of Filipino gay men in New York. He presents the possibility that the bakla, gay, Filipino, and American identities and practices may be rethought within history and culture as Filipino gay men create a sense of cultural citizenship amid and despite economic, political, and cultural constraints. The Filipino gay community's intersectionality of gender and social class further influences their negotiation of sexual identities in the gay globality. From a queer, immigrant, transgender, and transnational Filipino-American perspective, Fajardo (2011) discusses how Filipino seamen produce and coproduce Filipino masculinities in male heterosexuality and transgender tomboyism. Both Manalansan and Fajardo highlight the migration and mobility of Filipinos who shape their gender identities and create practices in the host society. Their studies show that these non-binary gender Filipino migrants' motives are not solely for economic opportunity but also for recreating and negotiating new sexual identities and Filipino LGBTQ spaces in global sexualities. Considering this study's research problem, how should the gendered Filipino migrants be examined, particularly the transpinay migrants?

Scholarship focusing on Filipino trans women continues to increase. Noteworthy contributions include the work of Garcia (1996, 2000) on Philippine gay culture; Johnson (1997) on transitioning in the Southern Philippines; Brewer (1999) on the roots of transvestism in the pre-

colonial Philippines; Winter (2006) on a comparative study between Thai and Filipino transgender identity; Winter, Rogando-Sasot, & King (2007) on a survey of transgender Filipino women's beliefs regarding their identity; Benedicto (2008) on exploring the bakla and gay culture from a colonial and neoliberal cultural perspective; and Stryker (2009) on transsexuality and postcolonial whiteness. More recent additions to the field have included Canoy's (2015) intersectional analysis of intimacy among gay and transgender women identities, David (2015) on transgender labor, and Inton (2018) on the representations of the bakla as male homosexual and transgender identities in Philippine cinema. This study on transpinays' labor migration aims to add to these scholarly works.

2.3 Gender Performativity

My approach in examining the gendered experiences of transpinay migrants involves looking into their relationships and entertainment work. I explore how gender performances in interactions change and how these transformations affect the lives of transpinay migrants. Gender, here, is viewed as performativity. Doing gender is fulfilling the situated conduct of an individual in interactional and institutional settings.

Butler (1990) introduced the concept of performativity as a stylized repetition of acts; our bodies enact the dominant conventions of gender. This theory posits that identity is an outcome of repetitive performances which constitute a particular sex, gender, or sexual identity, thus shaping the individual who enacts these performances. Gender policing, related to gender performativity, is an enforced practice of an individual's normative gender expressions and is based on the sex assigned at birth. Moreover, gender policing reinforces the normative gender performances of the gender binary as it delegitimizes the gender expressions of individuals who do not conform to normative expressions of gender, resulting in negative criticisms.

Butler's performativity concept led me to consider other theories in the formation of gender identity in social interactions. Kessler and McKenna's *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* (1978) centered on many attributes of gender as socially constructed and explored the experiences of both female-to-male and male-to-female transsexuals. Kessler and McKenna wrote that "everyone must display her or his gender in every interaction" (p. 126), referring to the formation of gender attributions. Given the sociocultural space where two genders exist, Kessler and McKenna argue, the idea of passing diminishes the "ongoing process of 'doing' gender in everyday interaction" (p. 126), and one can confirm a person's gender by retaking verbal and visual cues.

Doing gender is the process of constructing differences between women and men, and these differences enhance the "essentialness" of gender. West and Zimmerman (1987) contend that doing gender is inevitable because society has imposed the "essential" differences between women and men as well as the sex category (p. 137). While the concept of doing gender seems to be

restricted to the gender binary, I integrate it into the transgender experience to examine whether it enhances or weakens the essentialness of being transgender women, particularly in interactional and institutional settings in Japan.

Gender performativity comprises gender display (Goffman, 1976) in daily interactions, which is influenced by doing gender and, in the case of my participants, the essentialness of being transpinay. As I examine the transpinay entertainers' relationships and entertainment work, I explore how their gender performativity in interactions change and how these transformations, affecting their lives in private and public spheres, are different from the experiences of cisgender women entertainers.

3. Method

Drawing on a qualitative approach and using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), data was collected between 2012 and 2018 through multiple methods and in various settings. The multi-method data gathering included netnography (Kozinets, 2015), participant observations, focus group discussions, and fourteen semi-structured interviews about my participants' background, gender identity, visa, job application process, and entertainment work, relationships, and desires before and after migration.

I recruited participants through multiple channels, which included contacting my network of Filipino migrants, LGBTQ communities, the academe, the media, and the arts. Moreover, I reached out both physically and digitally to spaces and groups, which offered opportunities to find transpinay entertainers. Snowball sampling from individuals accessed in these ways allowed further access to non-binary members of LGBTQ communities and friendship networks (Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

I obtained access to three transgender performances and interviewed nine transpinays in Manila, one in Cebu, and four in Japan. Only two informants agreed to have follow-up interviews, so I utilized social networking sites to examine the situation of my participants who were active on social media. Because participants used Japanese names when they worked at the club, Japanese pseudonyms were used to name all informants; club names were changed to keep the information confidential.

At the time of the interview, the participants, all of whom were transgender entertainers, ranged in age from 30s to 50s. Nearly all were aware of their sexual orientation and gender identity as early as the age of six or seven and had felt same-sex attraction during puberty. They were from lower-middle or middle social classes in Manila or the Visayan region. Almost all participants entered university, and some graduated with a bachelor's degree. Participants generally had limited work and overseas travel experience before relocating to Japan. Some participants practiced Catholicism or belonged to other Christian denominations.

The major data source was a series of 60- to 90-minute audio-recorded interviews in which speakers code-switched from Japanese to Taglish (mix of Tagalog, or Filipino, and English). Each participant selected the interview location and provided a signed consent form or oral-informed consent. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, translated to English, and analyzed based on grounded theory principles. Major themes emerging from the narratives were coded and linked to relevant concepts (Weiss, 1994).

The research method (Cresswell, 2014) considered in analyzing data is social constructivism, which is the individual's search for meaning and understanding in the world they live and work. I apply social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) since I am dealing with participants negotiating their gender identities as migrants in Japan, developing subjective varied and multiple meanings of their experiences, leading me to delve into their complex views. The general questions encourage the participants to reflect on the meaning of a circumstance created in interactions with other individuals.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Negotiating Migration

4.1.1 Motivation for Migration

Before examining the negotiations of transpinay entertainers in their relationships and entertainment work, it is important to note the reasons for their relocation to Japan. The main motivations for transpinays to migrate and work in Japan are sexual emancipation and the compounding socioeconomic factors related to family and gender.

Meru, one of the participants in this study, became motivated to pursue her aspirations under the influence of family migration. Frequently in Filipino families, a family member or a relative who is a migrant will encourage other family members or relatives to relocate. Meru's cousin, a trans woman entertainer in Japan, inspired both Meru and her sibling to become entertainers themselves.

My cousin is also a trans. When we [her sibling who is also a transgender woman] were in high school, my cousin was already going to Japan. Life was tough for us then while I saw how her life had gradually improved. After I finished high school, I told myself I wanted to try it out in Japan. That was my goal. I realized my goal through my cousin. All the more, she was a beautiful trans woman. She was our idol.

Meru emphasized how beautiful trans women returning from Japan were. Moreover, her cousin's economic stability due to migration inspired her to pull her family out of poverty. When

Meru compared her life as a poor trans woman to her cousin's opportunities as a migrant, her sense of what she wanted began to evolve.

Eri began displaying feminine gender expressions by the age of five.³ When she came out, she was rejected by her parents, especially her father. To compensate for what she could not fulfill as a son—i.e., continuing the family lineage by getting married and having children—she moved to Japan to assert her independence and became her family's breadwinner.

While social mobility and sexual emancipation drove these trans women to relocate, there were other contributing factors as well. During the 1980s and 1990s, limited jobs were offered to trans women, who were typecast for employment in the service and entertainment industries. The high salary of working as an entertainer in Japan was enticing. When several participants realized how working in Japan transformed trans women into beautiful women, they were inspired to work as entertainers so they could save up for gender confirmation surgery. Aside from the job, a few participants revealed that Japanese culture and geographical proximity were also significant factors that led them to migrate (Okada, 2013).

Somewhat similar to the cisgender women entertainers, financial gain is not only the motive of the transpinays for migration. Family ties also play a significant role, whether being the obedient daughter for the cisgender woman entertainer or compensating for what the transpinay cannot fulfill as a son. Being a breadwinner is a common way among these entertainers to fulfill these family obligations. However, the economic reward of entertainment work for some transpinays is also an investment for their gender confirmation surgery. Finally, limited jobs and discrimination against transgender women during the 1980s and 1990s manifest the prevalent gender-sexual regimes during pre-migration.

4.1.2 Entertainer Visa for Transpinay Entertainers

An applicant has to follow various compulsory procedures to apply for an entertainer visa. The visa requirements and application process have changed in the last four decades. According to my informants, the procedures also depend on the period of application. There are four steps an applicant may take before applying for an entertainer visa: a) audition with cisgender women or all transgender women for the Filipino and Japanese recruiters and promotion agencies; b) join the Pre-departure Showcase (PDS) organized by the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA); c) present the Artist Record Book (ARB) to the POEA for approval; and d) direct recruitment without any audition. How the applicants learned about the audition or recruitment is also significant in understanding the application procedures. Several participants were informed

³ Five or six years old was the average age of the participants who started displaying femininity. When I asked them how they became aware of their gender identity, participants frequently responded, "I knew I was a girl. I wanted to be a girl."

about the audition through word of mouth or encouragement by their peers. Other participants, however, were recruited in public spaces where they were mistaken for cisgender women.

4.1.3 Homebound: Should I Stay or Leave?

After their contract expires, entertainers are required to return to their home countries. They cannot renew their entertainer visa unless they are offered another work contract. A dilemma occurs when an entertainer wants to stay in Japan even after the work contract ends, but it is more complicated for the transpinays.

According to my informants, two other ways would allow them to stay in Japan after their entertainer visa expires. Both strategies involve negotiations, money, and marriage. First, they can get legally married to a cisgender Japanese woman or lesbian to obtain a spousal visa. These pretend wives are either friends who want to help or acquaintances who get paid to agree not to disclose the arranged marriage. Second, trans women, in several cases, found cisgender Japanese male partners who proposed marriage. Philippine law prohibits the change of gender identity, and same-sex marriage is not legally recognized in Japan, so the transpinays have to file for a late birth certificate as a female to marry their Japanese male partners. These entertainers want to stay in Japan because they have found a partner whom they can legally marry and have become accustomed to living as trans women in the host society.

4.2 Negotiating Entertainment Work

Gender expressions are a natural part of the individuals' inclination to create a version of themselves and their relationships. They are the 'show,' which society is partly accountable for staging. As Goffman (1976) observes, there is no gender identity but rather a schedule for the portrayal of gender. Humans can illustrate masculinity and femininity, "and this capacity they have is by virtue of being persons, not females or males" (p. 76). An individual's relationships reflect a general portraiture of an individual's special character (pp. 75-76). This notion is evident in how the transpinays evince their gender expressions and negotiate social interactions wherein the timely schedule for portraying multiple identities, including gender and ethnicity, emerges.

For Mirai, the *nyū-hāfu omise* (trans woman club) was a place for the rich who wanted to be entertained without the sexual services. Mirai tried entertainment work for the first time during the 1980s and continues to do so in Tokyo. With Mirai's extensive experience working at clubs in Tokyo, she saw transgender women entertainers as more professional than their cisgender counterparts. She also differentiated the older generation of entertainers during the 1980s and 1990s from the younger generation. Mirai cited English proficiency levels as an example. Older entertainers were better English speakers because they were educated. Mirai emphasized that the clients visited the club for entertainment and a good conversation. Being an entertainer is not just

about being beautiful and talented but also about having the ability to communicate in Japanese or English on various topics. In this sense, an entertainer also does emotional labor (Hochschild, 2012), especially when the entertainer becomes a confidant. The more clients the entertainers get to buy drinks throughout the conversations, the more the club's profits increase.

Mirai revealed specific strategies for handling clients at a transgender club. The cisgender female hostesses of other clubs would take their male clients to the transgender club to get drunk, so they would not be touched. While the male clients on their first dates with women would go to these clubs to get the women drunk and take them to a love hotel⁴. According to Mirai, it is rare for transgender women to get harassed in her club.

In order to have repeat customers, Mirai would send business emails daily to her clients to invite them to the club. She reported that she used this business practice more frequently than the Japanese. According to Mirai, the clients were certain they would be entertained because of the image of Filipinos as *akarui* (cheerful), skilled singers and dancers, and possessed of sexy legs. She said, "Everyone [gets] entertained, everybody [falls] in love with the cuteness of the Filipinos, the warmth and the hospitality. Many people came because of word-of-mouth."

I don't know now, but during my time, Japan was really different and great. If you were a bakla in Japan, you could do anything you wanted. If you had experienced working in Japan, you had an edge among other baklas because it was perceived as it was designed for the bakla. You could do anything you wanted because nobody would bother you. I could dress up as a woman, and nobody would care. It was completely different there. Here [the Philippines], you would hear insulting remarks but in Japan, never! That is why I like Japan so much. There, we were just ordinary. It [being a transgender woman] was not a big deal.

—Reina, entertainer in the 1980s and 1990s

Reina, another transpinay entertainer, had no idea exactly where she would be brought as soon as she left the Philippines for Japan in 1986. Unlike Mirai, Reina had experience working at clubs in rural areas such as Saga and Ube. When the locals discovered she was a trans woman, they were surprised and would call her "*eiga* star" (movie star).

Her first club in Odawara was mixed. There were foreign cisgender women entertainers from Mexico and Taiwan, but most of the entertainers were trans women, and the customers preferred them. Reina believed they were appealing to the Japanese because they found them interesting and fun. "I think we, the Filipinos, were *ninki* [popular]. The Mexicans and Taiwanese were beautiful; even the Taiwanese had fairer skin. But why did they like us? Perhaps because we were *ma-chika* [chatty or talkative], and we worked well," Reina stated.

⁴ A short-stay hotel allowing guests to engage in sexual activities

The customers sometimes mistook Reina for being Singaporean or Malaysian because her makeup, particularly her eye makeup and long hair, contributed to her sex appeal. However, she added, “I had blue or green contact lenses at that time. Sometimes we tricked them into believing that we were half-Mexican, half-Puerto Rican, half-Spanish because of the colored contact lenses.”

Transpinay entertainers frequently take advantage of forming multiple ethnic identities in their performances in an effort to become more in demand at their workplace. Moreover, being a Filipino and a transgender woman makes transpinays more marketable to Japanese clients in entertainment work. Rather than feeling objectified, like the cisgender entertainers, transpinay entertainers find their skill to transform into multiple ethnic identities empowering (Okada, 2020).

In a mixed club of transgender and cisgender women entertainers, gender identity plays a significant role. The type of entertainment work between transgender women and the cisgender women’s clubs is relatively similar in customer service. Still, it varies in how entertainers deal with clients and how customers perceive them.

Mirai even claimed that the transgender women entertainers were more competent than the cisgender women entertainers because they trained rigorously for their performances, which was the highlight of a transgender club. In a mixed club, transgender women were sometimes asked to perform the comical skits or take on the role of the sidekick and take over the cisgender women entertainers’ work. However, this is not the case in all-transgender women clubs. The transpinay entertainers’ skill in highlighting their femininity and features makes them more appreciated by the audience members who practice gender policing.

Although transgender women could be as *ninki* (popular) as the cisgender women, or at times, even more popular, Reina also had her share of negative experiences with Japanese customers at a mixed club.

Of course, some preferred the [cisgender] women and did not like the bading [effeminate gay]. Diyos ko [My God], nakakaloka [it was crazy]! I would get upset because I had to “table” them. They were rude or ignored me. Sometimes, they would even say, “suki ja nai” [dislike].

Nonetheless, Reina thought that cisgender women entertainers were harassed more. She once had a cisgender female co-worker crying because she had been sexually harassed by a client and could not handle him. The trans women came to the rescue when these encounters happened. As Reina shared,

We could downplay it. If we had those kinds of customers, we were the ones who dealt with them. When they touched me, I would also touch them so they would stop. Japanese customers were just like that.

One feature of gender display is the optionality of various social positions within social situations (Goffman, 1976). For example, when an entertainer at the club initiates a display of affection to the customers because she is expected to do so, it can be politely declined or negotiated. Mirai's narrative revealed that being familiar with the kinds of customers helped her reconsider verbal and visual cues for the entertainers as they engaged in emotional labor. In Reina's case, she experienced being discriminated against by the male customer for being transgender at a mixed club, so she had to negotiate with the club manager to deal with it. In other cases, participants reported using their transgender identity to their advantage to support the cisgender women by handling problematic clients when cisgender women entertainers were incapable of doing so and were perceived as fragile and emotional. It was presumed that transgender women could deal with the difficult client even though there was a risk that they, too, could have been harassed.

Transpinay entertainers have to negotiate moral standards in labor migration as well. There is an assumption that working as a hostess and entertainer at a pub is related to sex work, but my participants were wary of getting involved with customers. However, people still tend to stereotype transgender women entertainers "as having less conservative moral standards than female hostesses" (Parreñas 2011, p. 160) and perceive them as likely to engage in sex work. As such, some trans women entertainers would agree that they are less likely to be questioned about their morality than cisgender women entertainers, for whom moral standing is a more significant constraint (Parreñas, 2011). My participants refused to engage in sex work but admitted that they were aware of co-workers, not only trans women but also cisgender women entertainers, who engaged in sex work.

4.3 Negotiation of Relationships

He is married with children, and he is a lot older than me. He does not consider himself gay or bi[sexual], and he even introduced me as his girlfriend to his children. You know how open the Japanese are. Even when I returned to Cebu, we kept in touch, and he was sending me money. I like him more than the other Japanese men because he took care of me.

—Aiko, entertainer from mid-1990s until early 2000s

4.3.1 From Clients to Life Partners

Customers are mostly single or married men from their 20s to 60s, *sarariman* or office workers in the city, and fishermen or farmers in the countryside. Entrance fees, excluding drinks, range between 2,300 yen and 20,000 yen (23 to 200 US dollars) consisting of two or three shows and after-show services such as face-to-face conversations with the entertainers. The kind of clients the club caters to and the amount an entertainer can earn depends on its location. If the club is in the main city of a high-class area, the clients comprise athletes, mid-career business people,

managers, or CEOs. Blue-collar workers do not necessarily pay less, but they customarily give more tips. Aside from the gratuity that ranges between 1,000 yen and 50,000 yen (10 to 500 US dollars), the transpinays may receive expensive presents from their clients. Reina confessed that she had a regular client who once gave her his monthly salary. For the transpinays, these gestures translate to the Japanese clients' recognition and appreciation of their performance and camaraderie.

The transpinays serving male clients or working with male colleagues might turn their platonic relationships into romantic relationships, which also happens to cisgender women. Most participants reported that Japanese men adored and treated them like "real women." However, Akie stated, "I think Japanese men fall in love with me because I am in between." In other words, she could be physically feminine yet possess the heart of a man, which, she explained, signifies strength.

According to my participants, male partners extended their financial and emotional support to their transpinay partners. Akie, who met her husband at the club, admitted that their relationship started as companionship until it became a serious relationship. Like Akie, Eri had been married to a Japanese man for more than 20 years. Their husbands did not ask them to have the gender confirmation surgery prior to marriage but helped them financially until they decided to undergo surgery. Several participants perceived relationships like these as an indication of patriarchy because the male partner acts as the breadwinner. Others, however, reported that they were on equal terms with their partners. Although gender roles could change without a second thought, my participants emphasized that their male partners accepted them as trans women and that the gender confirmation surgery was somewhat voluntary for them.

While cisgender women entertainers observed the prohibition strictly to avoid getting pregnant, dating clientele was somewhat tolerated among transgender entertainers. Many of these partners, first encountered at the club, did not identify as gay. Although there was no rule in the contract that prohibited the entertainers from engaging in intimate relationships with the clients, dating the customers outside the club was discouraged as this could lead to the club losing profit. Aiko's narrative is similar to that of other transpinay entertainers during the 1990s and early 2000s who returned to the Philippines and kept a long-distance relationship with their Japanese partners or husbands.

The Filipinos' cheerful personality and *lambing*, or the innate ability to express tenderness, were said to be the most attractive traits for Japanese men. Similar to the cisgender Filipino women's relationships with Japanese men, "love is made meaningful through global processes and the roles it plays in migrants' efforts to craft new gendered and sexualized subjectivities" (Faier, 2007, p. 148). Through the entertainers' performances and light conversations, the customers found they could relax, destress, and forget their anxieties, albeit temporarily. Gradually, the

relationship deepened and transformed from a client of a transpinay entertainer to a life partner. According to one participant, Japanese men prefer dating Filipinos because Filipinos prioritize family over work, unlike the Japanese, whose work always comes before family. For those Japanese men who prefer not to have offspring, a relationship with a transpinay suits them because there is no risk of pregnancy.

4.3.2 Relationships with other entertainers

The transpinays who were in temporary labor migration had saved money in Japan to spend it in their homeland while they built an affinity for and belongingness in both their countries of origin and destination. The transpinays demonstrate strong ties and friendships as significant aspects of being trans migrants. They are capable of building emotional connections and solidarity, referred to as *pakiisa* in Filipino. In Filipino culture and context, the term *pakiisa* “denotes collective equality and emotional collaboration,” as seen in the stories of working-class Filipino seamen and tomboys who demonstrate love and brotherhood as they “cocreate masculinities through *pakiisa*” (Fajardo, 2008, pp. 415-416). Likewise, the transpinays’ narratives evoke sisterhood and camaraderie.

Mirai was the first Filipino to become the top entertainer at a *nyū-hāfu omise* during the 1980s. Over a span of around thirty years, Mirai’s career evolved from being an entertainer to a *mama san* (club manager). The role of the *mama san* is not just to manage the club and the entertainers but also to give them whatever support they need. Mirai shared that when her *kohais* (juniors) had problems, “*Ako unang tatakbo*” (I’d be the first one to run to their rescue). For example, when one of her girls was hospitalized, Mirai stepped up. Mirai explained,

I was not always there, but they were surprised when I had to pay for her breast surgery because she did not have the money. Another girl would say, “Mama! My boyfriend beat me!” I would say, “I’m there, I’m there.” It’s part of my job description to look after the girls.

Mirai was not their biological mother but acted and was treated like their mother. She highlighted the rewards of working not only with Filipinos but with people of various cultural backgrounds and treating them like a family. Mirai, a university graduate, always pushed her girls to finish school and learn the Japanese language so they could appreciate Japan more.

Transpinay migrants, especially those rejected by their families, feel a sense of belonging with the other transpinays. The transition and migration stories of the transpinays illustrate how their gender and migrant identities are built on shared experiences and memories. An individual taking part in a group's narrative exchanges will recognize oneself in these stories (Mackie, 2008).

Transpinay and cisgender women entertainers have difficulty creating social networks outside the club because they work at night. Some participants who were permanent residents consistently interacted with other Filipino migrants, while the others chose not to because they

were preoccupied with work and related more to the Japanese and other Filipino entertainers with whom they worked closely. Transpinays who keep strong ties with other Filipinos sometimes engage in businesses with them. For example, Eri has a Filipino food catering business that she promotes on social media. Mirai has a vast network of Filipinos in Japan and abroad. She often posts on social media about her Filipino friends visiting Tokyo. Although they do not visit their homeland, they sustain relationships with the other Filipinos, not only in Japan but also in other countries, to feel a sense of home through connectedness with fellow Filipinos. Given the time, part-time or retired entertainers have reached out to other transpinays, Filipino migrants, and return migrants—social media has made reconnection more convenient.

However, most of my participants, who experienced working at a mixed club with cisgender Filipino women entertainers or non-Filipino transgender entertainers, revealed competition in the workplace and the possibility of friendship outside work. For several of my participants, any non-Filipino entertainer was a competitor. Kaori felt that competition was inevitable, particularly in clubs with other foreign entertainers whose goal was to be the top entertainer. Kaori had a Russian competitor who was envious of her being the top entertainer. Another participant noted that her Chinese colleague's high-level Japanese proficiency gained the attention of most clients. Beauty is the prime factor in becoming the most popular entertainer, but charisma, communication skills, and intelligence also matter.

Transpinay entertainers revealed positive and negative feelings towards working with cisgender Filipino women entertainers. According to a few participants, the cisgender Filipino women entertainers may feel envious of the transpinay's popularity. This negative feeling stems from the crab mentality, a typical Filipino trait that emerges when a newcomer gets all the clients' attention and the old-timers lose their repeat customers. However, transpinays working with cisgender women entertainers do not always display this trait. Several transpinay entertainers get along well with cisgender women entertainers, developing deep, mutually supportive friendships. One of my participants noted that she felt blessed to have this fellowship with other Filipinos and to know that someone had her back. Nonetheless, a few transpinay participants remained doubtful, emphasizing the competition at the club and claiming to avoid friendships with their fellow Filipino entertainers while at work.

5. Conclusion

As trans visibility increases, stories of unheard transgender voices are gaining an audience. The transpinay entertainers' stories in the past three decades need to be unpacked in order to understand their significance to the transgender experience. Their narratives show that the transpinay migration experience in Japan includes negotiations, particularly in entertainment work and relationships, as these trans women shape their trans migrant identities. Furthermore, the

transpinay entertainers' narratives reveal various kinds of negotiations demonstrating their resilience in dealing with their extraordinary circumstances during their transition.

Somewhat similar to the cisgender women entertainers, the motivation for transpinays to migrate to Japan involves compounding socioeconomic factors related to family and gender. Lack of job opportunities and discrimination against transgender women during the 1980s and 1990s contributed to their aspiration to leave the homeland and explore Japan, which was recognized as a paradise for trans women. The financial rewards of entertainment work is a significant factor for the transpinay entertainers seeking to undergo transition.

Transpinay entertainers possess the skill of transforming themselves into multiple identities, making them appealing and marketable to Japanese clients. Communication skills are as essential as beauty and talent in becoming a competent entertainer in a transgender club. Through performativity and social interactions, multiple gender and ethnic identities emerge for these transpinays who provide a wholesome, not erotic, entertainment. Unlike the cisgender women entertainers being objectified, the transpinay entertainers find their ability to transform into multiple ethnic identities amusing and empowering.

In a mixed club of transgender and cisgender women entertainers, gender identity plays a significant role. Entertainment work in transgender and cisgender women's clubs is relatively similar in customer service, but it differs in how entertainers deal with clients and how customers perceive them. Transgender women entertainers have trained rigorously for their performances, which is the highlight of a transgender club. They are presumed to handle demanding clients and are generally compared unfavorably to cisgender women entertainers in terms of morality even though there was a risk that they, too, could have been harassed and would not engage in sex work.

Relationships are significant in entertainment work. Although there may be competition at times among entertainers in the workplace, friendship outside work and a sense of belongingness as a family are possible. The transpinays serving male clients or working with male colleagues might turn platonic relationships into romantic relationships, which also happens to cisgender women entertainers. A dilemma occurs when an entertainer wants to stay in Japan after the work contract ends and get married to their Japanese partners. This is more complicated for the transpinays because changing gender identity is prohibited in their home country, and same-sex marriage is not legally recognized in the host country. Hence, they find strategies to negotiate their gender identities.

The migration experiences of the transpinay entertainers are different and more positive than the cisgender women entertainers in Japan. It cannot be denied that the experiences of both the cisgender women and the transpinay entertainers include forms of oppression, which are part of the whole story of Filipino labor migrants in Japan. Still, gender display and performativity are embedded in their migrant lives in Japan, where the stigma against transgender women is not as strong as in their homeland. Whatever discrimination and strife they experience, transpinay

entertainers have strategies that help them cope with challenges and the support of their partners or colleagues who have become their family in Japan. While the Filipino migration to Japan amounts to feminized workers symbolizing oppression, the exceptional cases of transpinay entertainers as Filipino labor migrants exemplify resilience and negotiability that enhance the essentialness of being a trans woman as a gender identity.

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