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Queering the labor migration: Highly-skilled Filipino gay men as labor migrants in Bangkok, Thailand

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Abstract: While a number of migration studies concentrated on the economic, political, and social issues faced by immigrants both in their home and host countries, studies that attempt to connect migration, culture and sexuality, particularly the migration decisions among gay men and how such migration shaped and influenced their identity and sexuality within the Global South context are scarce. Using the theoretical frame of queer intercultural communication, this study aims to explore and understand the labor migration of two highly skilled Filipino gay men and how they construct or reconstruct their identity and sexuality in Bangkok, Thailand. Findings from the individual interviews revealed that personal, professional, and social factors shaped participants' decision to come and work in Bangkok. Being highly skilled and having a job in Bangkok provides the participants the means not only to support their personal and family needs but also to participate in queer discourses and practises that allowed them to explore and understand their sexuality. This study highlights that looking at the issues on identity and belonging from the gay men's perspectives enhances our understanding of the multiple gender identities that contribute to the study of queer intercultural communication and migration.

Subjects: Gender Studies - Soc Sci; Intercultural Communication; Gender & Development

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The absence and lack of job opportunities, equality, and safe spaces in one's home country is an essential migration factor among the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) people. For Filipino gay men, Bangkok may have become a place for economic production and social reproduction, providing them with safe gay spaces to address and fulfill their personal, professional, and social needs. This study aims to understand the labor migration among highly skilled Filipino gay men and explore how they construct or reconstruct their identity and sexuality, and negotiate their belonging in Bangkok, Thailand. It highlights that looking at the issues on identity and belonging from the gay men's perspectives can enhance our understanding of the multiple gender identities and allows us to see a holistic consideration of the problems that contribute to sexuality, migration, and communication.
1. Introduction

In the last years, migration studies have informed us that one of the many effects of globalization is making the labor market competitive (Edo, 2018; Edo & Rapoport, 2019; Gheasi & Nijkamp, 2017), which compels professionals and other skilled workers to leave their home country and work abroad. de Haas et al. (2020) notes that the “increasing levels of education and specialization combined with the complexity of labor markets”, “inequalities in wealth and job opportunities”, and “violent conflict and political oppression in some countries” (p. 3–4) will continue to be the common reasons of people’s migration.

In the context of the Global South, particularly in most of the countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region, where poverty (Harkins & Lindgren, 2017) and political violence may remain to be a problem, people may seek refuge and look for better and high-paying jobs in other countries. For instance, they may choose to come to and work in Singapore, Malaysia, or Thailand as these countries are highly accessible and may offer better employment opportunities. Given the free visa policy for all citizens in the region, they can easily cross border and may either work in low-skilled or highly-skilled jobs.

In queer migration studies, aside from political and economic instabilities as factors of people’s mobility, there are also some “push factors” that encourage queer people to migrate and work abroad. The lack of sexual freedom and safe space in their home country may be two of the most common reasons why queer people leave their home countries. Likewise, “pull factors” such as coming out in another country, fulfilling and satisfying their affective and sexual needs, and exploring more of their sexual identity may also play an important role in queer migration. For example, in a study conducted by Manalastas et al. (2017) on people’s attitudes, feelings, and behaviors towards lesbians and gay men in the countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, they found that people from these countries had a negative attitude, belief, and behavior towards lesbians and gay men. Manalastas et al. (2017) acknowledge that while the rest of the countries in the ASEAN region had an unfavorable view towards lesbian and gay men, the people from Indonesia and Malaysia held the most negative attitude towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) people. Such negative perception, which is often attributed to religion, may only limit the opportunities among the members of the LGBTQIA+ community in expressing their gender and sexual identity. Due to stigma and homonegativity towards them, gay men may choose to come out and express their identities in places where they are safe and can feel a sense of community.

While there is an abundance of studies that have focused on economic, political, and social aspects of migration (service workers and migration program policies; Paul, 2015; health and well-being; Labao et al., 2018; Ofreneo & Canoy, 2017; remittances; McDonald & Valenzuela, 2016; and settlement issues; Johnson et al., 2019), there is a paucity of scholarship in queer migration studies that examined the migration decisions among gay men and how such migration shaped and influenced their identity and sexuality within the Global South context. Much of the recent queer studies, which tend to focus on investigating the role of the family in queer migration (Luo, 2022), the relationality of culture, family, and religion in coming out publicly (Pistella et al., 2020; Thomsen, 2021), gay refugees’ integration practices (Karimi, 2021), and how sexuality is communicated and translated by queer asylum seekers (Akin, 2017) have been mostly contextualized in the Global North.

Using the theoretical frame of queer intercultural communication (Yep et al., 2019), the present study aims to understand the labor migration among highly skilled Filipino gay men and explore how they construct or reconstruct their identity and sexuality and how they negotiate their
belonging in Bangkok, Thailand. The need to look at highly skilled gay men as LGBTQIA+ transnationals in queer and labor migration studies cannot be neglected since their presence in the global labor market is growing (Paisley & Tayar, 2016). Furthermore, there is a need to examine the complexity of the relationship between sexuality and migration to theorize queer communication from the perspectives of gay men in the Global South, particularly, among Filipino gay men in Bangkok, Thailand. The study’s findings may add to the growing literature on queer intercultural communication and advance our understanding of the intersectionality of queer, migration, and communication studies in a Global South-South and a non-Western context and perspective.

2. Labor migration in the ASEAN region
The Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN), which was founded on 8 August 1967 and composed of ten member-states (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam), aims to promote economic, social, political, cultural, and security cooperation among the countries in the region. Although poverty and unequal wealth distribution may remain two of the most challenging issues faced by most ASEAN countries (Harkins & Lindgren, 2017), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) was formed in 2015 to address these issues and to realize its ultimate goal of economic integration among the nations in the region. Such a formation of AEC is believed to open free movement of goods, services, investments, and flow of capital and skills (ASEAN Economic Community [AEC], 2012) that may greatly impact the economy of the ASEAN region.

With the founding of the ASEAN and with the formation of the AEC, the intraregional migration within the ASEAN region has gradually increased in the last years as it does not only pave way for the economic integration among the region’s member-states, it also opens for an exchange of skilled workers and free mobility among its citizens. Both high-skilled and low-skilled workers in the region may have moved out from their country to other neighboring countries, where their skills are in demand not only to contribute to the growing economy of the region but mainly to support their families back in their home country financially. Although the labor movement in the region may impose some migration policies issues, the creation of the economic community provides a great opportunity for the people to cross borders easily as an entry visa for all its citizens in the region is no longer necessary. This free movement of the people, including the workers’ migration adds to the increase in intraregional migrants which generates growth and economic development within the region.

3. Thailand as a migration destination among gay men
Although Thailand is considered an upper-middle-income country (World Bank, 2019), many migrant workers are attracted to come and work due to its booming tourism industry and prosperous and stable economy. Geographically, Thailand is easily reached by land, air, and sea as it is in the mainland of Southeast Asia sharing borders with Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Malaysia. Its central location facilitates easier international migration flow both for low-skilled and high-skilled migrants, including refugees and displaced persons. Thus, most of the cross-border migrant workers who are low-skilled and high-skilled come from the neighboring countries of Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

For gay men and other members of the LGBTQIA+, Thailand may be the most popular travel destination as it is more friendly, accommodating, and accepting towards gay men than other countries in the region. Although there has been a contradicting view towards acknowledging the rights of the LGBTQIA+ people and recognizing their presence in society (Manalastas et al., 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2017), Thailand is known as the “gay paradise and a safe haven for the LGBTQIA+ community” (Shrestha et al., 2020, p. 415) as evident in the presence of gay bars, saunas, gay
massage parlors, drag queen shows, sex reassignment surgery clinics, the vibrant gay community, and the popularity of boys love TV series and movies.

4. Queer intercultural communication

Eguchi and Asante (2016) claimed that in communication theory, there has been a limited knowledge production and contribution coming from the perspectives of LGBTQIA+ people. They further declared that what dominates in the general knowledge production in communication studies are studies that often uncover the lives of heteronormative people. Such lack of studies that reflect the lives of the LGBTQIA+ people especially those LGBTQIA+ people of color and from the Global South limit our understanding of the “fluidity and complexity of culture and communication from multiple perspectives” (Eguchi & Asante, 2016, p. 172).

Queer intercultural communication is a union of two disciplines (Yep et al., 2019); the queer theory and the intercultural communication studies. While the field of intercultural communication studies has put a premium on the study of cultures and cultural differences without a clear connection to sexuality, queer theory studies mainly deal only with sexuality and LGBTQIA+ politics without a direct focus on cultures and cultural differences. However, the focus for both intercultural communication and queer theory studies only leaves a gap in the study of sexuality or LGBTQIA+ politics in relation to cultures and cultural differences. Thus, queer intercultural communication was introduced to oppose and question the normative knowledge production concerning queer sexuality and identity and the relationship among culture, identity, and power (Eguchi & Calafell, 2020). Since unspoken and unwritten dominances of heteronormativity continue to become a fundamental area of knowledge creation (Eguchi & Asante, 2016), queer intercultural communication problematizes the position of queer communication studies as equally important as heteronormative intercultural communication studies.

Generally, queer intercultural communication studies emphasize transnational LGBTQIA+ people and their intercultural adaptation processes, identity, and belongingness negotiations in their new cultural environment. Although the term “intercultural” is a complex concept that refers to the dialogue and understanding across different cultures, in intercultural communication, it is the communication between people from different cultural background. Moreover, it seeks to understand the complexities of communication and culture in the modern world (Croucher et al., 2015). Therefore, looking at the issues on identity and belonging from the LGBTQIA+ people’s perspectives not only enhance our understanding of the multiple gender identities but also allows us to see a holistic consideration of the issues that contribute to the study of queer intercultural communication.

As queer intercultural communication is emerging (Yep et al., 2019), there is a need to consider the intricacy of the intersection between culture and communication from the perspectives of LGBTQIA+ people (Eguchi & Asante, 2016). By doing so, it does not only address the lack of concerns towards LGBTQIA+ people, but it also offers an understanding of the contexts where LGBTQIA+ people try to negotiate their identities and adapt to a new culture. This is particularly important since a large body of queer literature, which is mostly conducted and published outside of the communication field, still concentrates in the United States and other western countries as a dominant place for theory and knowledge production (Chávez, 2013). Therefore, the role of queer intercultural communication should not only present the “white, middle-class U.S. American genders and sexualities perspectives” (Chávez, 2013, p. 85) but also to continually produce a theory that can make life more livable for queer and, trans people of color and from the underrepresented Global South.

Given the scarcity of queer communication studies, Chávez (2013) had called on communication scholars to take an interest in these studies since they also intersect with communication. In addition, Chávez also emphasized that there is a need to expand and clarify the intersections
between queer studies and intercultural communication studies in order to advance our understanding of queer intercultural communication.

The present study aims to fill the gap and contribute to the discussion of the intersectionality of migration, sexuality, and culture from the perspectives of highly skilled Filipino gay men within the Global South context. The following questions framed this study, serving as a compass for the conduct of the inquiry:

(1) How do Filipino transnationals view themselves as highly skilled gay men in Bangkok, Thailand?
(2) What perceptions of sexuality do they have for their new cultural environment?
(3) How do they communicate and negotiate their identities and practices of belonging in Bangkok, Thailand?

5. Methodology
This qualitative research study used interpretivist interview methods to describe and understand the labor migration among highly skilled Filipino gay men and explore how they construct or reconstruct their identity and sexuality and how they negotiate their belonging in Bangkok, Thailand.

5.1. Setting and participants
The present study was conducted in Bangkok, the entertainment, shopping, politics, culture, education, and transportation capital and the most densely populated city of Thailand. It is popularly known for Thai people as Krungthep Mahanakhon or just Krungthep.

Two highly skilled Filipino gay men (pseudonyms: Ram and Jed) volunteered to participate in the study. They have been working as English language teachers in primary schools in Bangkok, Thailand for three and five years, respectively.

The participants were recruited through a “call for participation” advertisement on Facebook (Sikkens et al., 2016). The use of social media sites such as Facebook is deemed necessary for this investigation, especially because the study involved participants from the “hidden populations”, in this case, Filipino gay men. Additionally, social networking sites were particularly useful when recruiting for research participants who are hard to reach (Guillory et al., 2018) and stigmatized or marginalized in the offline world (Sikkens et al., 2016).

The advertisement was posted on Filipino Facebook group pages in Thailand for a period of four weeks. After four weeks, three potential research participants responded to the call for participation. However, only two of them were qualified to participate in the study since the other one was working in a province outside of Bangkok for five years already.

5.2. Data gathering procedures
This study employed in-depth semi-structured individual interviews to gather the qualitative data for the study. The in-depth semi-structured individual interviews were conducted online using Zoom or Google Meet as travel restrictions still posed a problem during the data-gathering phase. The interview was done in both Filipino and English languages and was recorded. Participants were asked if they wanted the interview to be recorded.

Prior to conducting the study, a research ethics approval was sought from the Human Research Ethics board of the first author’s university. The application was approved on 13 September 2021 with human research ethics approval number WUEC-21-258-01.

Additionally, before conducting the interview, some guide interview questions were forwarded to the participants. They were also informed that they could withdraw their participation anytime or if
they felt uncomfortable with the questions. The interview lasted between 60 minutes to 120 minutes. The interview data were kept in a secured folder on the first author’s laptop so that no one could access those data.

Lastly, the transcript data were sent back to the participants to ensure validity and clarity. Participants were told that they were allowed to modify, change, and edit the transcripts if deemed necessary. The data were coded manually by “making the text manageable,” “hearing what was said,” and “developing theory” (Lewins & Silver, 2007, pp. 262–267). Lastly, themes were highlighted, responding to the research questions posed for the study.

6. Findings and discussion

6.1. Migration for economic reasons: As highly skilled professionals

Participants acknowledged that they worked in Bangkok because of the lack of employment options and low salary rates in the Philippines.

Jed is a 30-year old highly skilled Filipino gay man who now works as a kindergarten school language teacher in one of the government schools in Bangkok. Although not an education graduate since he finished a degree in Psychology, he has been teaching in the city for five years already.

I've been working here for 5 years already. I started at Petthananom School in Rangsit. I started working in May 2016. Then in October 2016, I resigned and looked for another job. Luckily, I got the job at Gymboree Play and Music Learning Center. I worked there for 2 years. After that, I transferred to Ramkhampaeng Institute of Languages for another 2 years. My current workplace now is Anuban Pathumthani. I've been here for almost a year already. I think it's easy to find work in Bangkok if you have a bachelor's degree and can speak English. This is because Thailand needs foreign teachers to teach academic subjects in English to improve the English proficiency level of the students. Even if you didn't major in English but had a degree aligned with the core subjects at school, you can be hired to teach. Just like me, I didn't have a bachelor's degree in education, but I was still hired to teach basic English to kindergarten students.

Ram is 28 years old. Just like Jed, he also came to Bangkok, Thailand to work because of the low salary rate in the Philippines. He was a public-school teacher, teaching English subjects for three years in one of the secondary schools in his province. Additionally, he felt that he did not grow in his profession and wanted to explore and gain more experience, skills, and knowledge abroad since he was still young.

After graduation, I immediately took the licensure exam and was offered a teaching post by the Department of Education in the Philippines. However, I realized that I didn't grow and develop professionally after three years. I was not challenged anymore. Getting a promotion was hard, and the salary was very low. Although it’s good to teach in the Philippines because you can help and educate the children, I am still young. I can still gain more experience and skills outside of the country. I can still acquire more knowledge that I can use to contribute to the Philippines should I decide to come back after ten years).

Working overseas has always been part of the Filipino culture as a way of dealing with poverty, lack of high paying jobs, and low salary rates in the country. Edo (2018), Edo and Rapoport (2019), and Gheasi and Nijkamp (2017) reported that poverty was the main reason why a number of Filipinos had to work abroad. According to Bolante (2014), a growing number of Filipino women left the country to work abroad as domestic helpers due to financial difficulties and the lack of employment options in the Philippines. For most Filipino men, working abroad in low-skilled or high-skilled jobs would also make them more money to support their families.

In the present study, it is also evident that Filipino gay men see labor migration to Bangkok, Thailand as a way to earn more money. As highly skilled, they believed that having bachelor's
degrees and being able to speak English well helped them get a teaching job in Bangkok. This concurred with what Grigoleit-Richter (2017) mentioned that highly skilled professionals have easier access to the labor market since they are highly mobile and economically oriented individuals.

Generally, teaching jobs in Thailand may be considered one of the popular jobs for foreigners in the country. In a study conducted by Ulla (2021), the researcher mentioned that the Ministry of Education in Thailand permitted all schools to hire foreign English-speaking lecturers and teachers to help the local teachers improve Thai students’ low English proficiency levels. The government believed that when foreign teachers were seen teaching in Thai schools, students would be exposed to how the English language was used, improving students’ language skills. Although the Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) of the ASEAN region (Hamanaka & Jusoh, 2016) did not include teachers as one of the eight professionals who are allowed to work as part of the trade-in services in the region, the need to develop competence in the use of the English language among students in the country paved its way for the government to recognize the role played by foreign teachers in Thai schools.

Among the foreign teachers teaching in Thailand, Filipinos formed one of the biggest groups of teachers in the country (Knell, 2017). Although the English language is only their second language, their language fluency brought them to Thai kindergarten, primary, secondary, and tertiary classrooms teaching English, Science, Mathematics, and Computer subjects (Ulla, 2018). This means that Filipino teachers, who have a bachelor’s degree and can speak English, could find a teaching job in Thailand.

Furthermore, while participants acknowledged that their migration to Bangkok was pushed by economic motives, it is also evident that professional growth came as a secondary reason of their labor migration. For example, Ram decided to come to and work in Bangkok because of the low salary rate in the Philippines. However, coming to Bangkok was also an opportunity for him to gain more experience, learn some skills, and get more knowledge that he could utilize when he decided to go back to the Philippines and teach. Given that he is still “young”, he could still explore more of his potentials and skills outside of the Philippines. Teaching in Bangkok could potentially develop him professionally. Gilson and Martin (2012) confirmed that teachers who have a teaching experience abroad may become open-minded and understanding towards other people, cultures, and global issues. Their exposure to different teaching environments allowed them to reflect on their teaching practices that may have an impact on their profession.

For highly skilled Filipino gay men in the study, this implies that working overseas may not always be because of poverty and the lack of job opportunities in the Philippines. The need for professional development may also induce migration, and Ram, as a highly skilled gay man, saw that Bangkok could offer him a different teaching experience, enhancing his skills and gaining more knowledge of his profession. This is contrary to most of the findings in migration studies (Chalamwong, 2011; Edo, 2018; Edo & Rapoport, 2019; Gheasi & Nijkamp, 2017) that highlighted economic reasons as the most common reason for people’s migration.

6.2. Migration for identity and sexuality formation: As gay men in Bangkok

Although the primary purpose of the participants in working in Bangkok was to find a job and gain experience, as self-identified gay men, coming to Bangkok also meant the chance for them to express their identity and sexuality. For Ram, he compared himself to a flower that blossomed in Bangkok since he could now show his true identity.

I see myself as a discreet gay man when I was in the Philippines. I had to hide my sexuality because gays like me are not accepted. I had to look masculine and maintain my masculinity. My perception of sexuality is a man and a woman. I do not see myself as gay and I am hesitant to present my sexuality. But when I came to Bangkok, my perception of sexuality is freedom.
This is because I am free to express myself and do whatever I want. In Bangkok, I could fall in love and build a relationship with the same sex. I'm like a flower blooming in Bangkok.

Furthermore, Ram mentioned that coming to Bangkok changed his perspectives about his sexuality. He realized that he was wild, adventurous, and daring when it comes to sex, things that he could not do in the Philippines.

Bangkok has impacted the way I see myself based on the experiences I have here. I realized that I am really that wild, adventurous, and daring when it comes to sex. I could say that I was able to explore more of my sexuality here in Bangkok.

Jed also shared the same experience with Ram in that he described himself as a free bird in Bangkok. He also compared his experience, reiterating how accepted and open are the gays in Bangkok than in the Philippines.

Gay people are accepted in Bangkok, and they are more open than in the Philippines. To be honest, I am not as flirt and slutty as this when I was in the Philippines. I could say that it is only here in Bangkok that I was able to spread my wings and fly because they do not discriminate and judge gay people here.

However, it should be noted that although Jed and Ram revealed that they could now express their identity and sexuality in Bangkok, they still maintained that discreet personality type because that was how they started identifying themselves back in the Philippines. What they refer to here as freedom is the freedom to participate in gay practices and activities in Bangkok without the fear that people may judge and discriminate them. Comparing how they presented themselves in their home country, they conveyed that in Bangkok, they were able to get out of the box and be true to themselves. In other words, they discovered and explored more of their sexuality when they came to Bangkok.

Bangkok, as a capital of Thailand, has been considered as one of the most popular and visited cities in the world with about 22.8 million visitors reported in the 2019 annual rankings by MasterCard Inc (Setboonsarng, 2019). For gay men, such popularity can be attributed to the fact that Thailand, in general, is considered as a gay paradise (Shrestha et al., 2020) since it promotes queer tourism and tolerance towards queer people. Thus, a number of gay men from all over the world may be interested to come and visit Bangkok. However, coming to Bangkok means that gay men may either have to adapt the kind of culture in Bangkok’s gay community or abandon temporarily the culture they may have. This may involve prior misconceptions about their sexuality when they were still in their home country. For example, when Ram came to Bangkok, he realized that being gay does not mean that one should act as effeminate. In other words, it is not the action and behavior that defines a gay man. To him, it is all about the feelings and preference towards same sex.

I realize that being gay is not really about acting so loud and feminine. You can be gay even if you are not loud and out. I meet a lot of gay men who are like this in Bangkok. Things like this make me realize that Bangkok is really like this.

Ram’s realization can be an example of how he carried the concept of being gay as influenced by his culture back in the Philippines. His perception of being gay as soft and feminine, thus, mirrors the culture that he grew up in the Philippines.

In the Philippines, the terms “bakla”, “bading”, “bayot” are often labeled to Filipino men who are effeminate. Such terms are often perceived to be derogatory because they are mostly used as street language to bully men who are effeminate. Instead of calling a person by his real name, he is often called bakla”, “bading”, “bayot”. In another situation, when a man fails to do something or makes a mistake, he is often blamed because of being effeminate.
According to Tan (2001), a “bakla” is a low-income, cross-dresser, effeminate gay man also known as parloristas since they usually work in beauty parlors. Others also work as house helpers, market vendors, and entertainers. A “bakla” does not engage in sexual activities to fellow “bakla” but only gives sexual service to straight men who do not have access to sex.

In the study, when Ram came to Bangkok, his perception of a “bakla” (effeminate gay man) changed. He observed that gay men in Bangkok were not effeminate and that these gay men projected the image of straight-acting individuals who prefer other gay men to straight men. This suggests that he embraced Bangkok’s gay culture, and the way he perceived gay men in Bangkok is no longer how he perceived them when he was still in the Philippines. Therefore, it can be argued that Ram adapted to the gay culture in Bangkok because of his exposure and constant communication with his new cultural environment. Adapting the gay culture in Bangkok would mean that Ram was able to change his perceptions about being gay, how gays look like, and how they act. Such perceptions could have an implication on how Ram understood himself and the concept of being gay in Bangkok as compared to when he was in the Philippines. As revealed earlier, Ram disclosed that he described himself as discreet gay man because that was how he acted himself when in the Philippines. This suggests that being in Bangkok confirmed and validated the way how he presented himself in the Philippines since he realized that being gay is not being effeminate.

Furthermore, it is also essential to note that Bangkok’s gay culture has also become commercialized and gentrified (Ruting, 2008). Gay men would want to come to Bangkok because of the affordance of the gay district that houses safe spaces for them to express themselves. Although they have to pay, it is a way for them to participate in Bangkok’s gay community. In fact, Jed was willing to pay for these spaces just to engage in many sexual activities as he found a community and belonging in the gay district of Bangkok. He said,

It’s nice to know that Bangkok’s gay community comprises gay men coming from different countries and races. This means that one can try having sex with men from different nationalities and compare their penis sizes. I mean, you have some stories and experiences to share with other gay men.

Although Fitzgerald and Grossman (2021) argued that sexual commodification is a result of economic inequality, that is, those who have the means and the money have the potential to engage in different sexual commodities for pleasure, and those who do not have the means would likely resort to selling their sexual services, the present study emphasized that sexual commodification in Bangkok’s gay community was aimed only for sex tourism. Gay men migrants and tourists only pay for the sexual spaces and rarely for sex services, except for sex massage. In other words, there may be no selling of bodies for sex among gay migrants in Bangkok since they only gather and pay for the spaces to perform sexual activities. In addition, most of these gay migrants who are willing to pay for these spaces and engage in various sexual activities are middle-class gay men who have a job back in their home countries or in Bangkok. Jed acknowledged this when he revealed that he had to pay to enter the bathhouses, gay clubs, and gay disco bars to participate and join the fun. Thus, sex commodification in Bangkok is based on gay men’s demand for a place where all gay men tourists or migrants gather and perform sexual activities together.

Verduzco (2014) emphasized that homoerotic desire and consequent sexual practices are part of gay men’s identity. The absence of such sexual practices in their home country may influence their decision to travel to other countries like Bangkok, Thailand. In fact, Weeden et al. (2016) confirmed that gay men are interested in looking for sexual experiences when away from their home countries, especially when they are on vacation. In the context of the study, highly skilled Filipino gay men also wanted to engage in any sexual experiences in Bangkok, especially since they are away from their family in the Philippines and living and working in a place where they are accepted and tolerated.
However, with Bangkok gay culture, migrant gay men may have to define, communicate, and negotiate their identities and practices of belonging in their new cultural environment. Although the study participants maintained that they never had a problem adapting to the Thai culture, emphasizing that the Philippines and Thailand are so much alike with regards to culture, they struggled in creating their spaces and negotiating their practices of belonging in Bangkok’s gay community. They confessed that being discreet, having a fit and muscled body, and looking good were some of the characteristics of Bangkok’s gay men that they thought they needed to embrace. Thus, for them to conform with the community, they have to adapt and embrace these characteristics by becoming fit, muscled, and discreet.

Being discreet or straight-acting among gay men is a term that is used to describe how gay men behave and present themselves in public or to other groups of gay men. As there are a number of gay men who prefer to date and or have sex with gay men who are discreet or straight-acting, such a behavior or gay self-presentation is commonly prescribed by other gay men, especially if meeting them the first time. In the heteronormative society, being discreet or straight-acting is also a way of hiding one’s identity to avoid bullying, discrimination, and injustices. According to Baker (2003), the concept of being discreet or straight-acting among gay men has its roots in the 1980s when gay men in the UK were blamed because of the spread of HIV-AIDS.

Having a fit and muscled body was also reported as one of the identifying marks of being gay that participants of the study observed and experienced in the new gay cultural environment. For example, Ram admitted that he had to look fit and toned as he was once rejected by someone because he looked fat.

There was this Thai gay man before whom I really liked. He told me that he didn’t like me because I was fat. From that moment, I realized that I needed to lose weight and gain muscle, and that I needed to be straight-acting. I started going to the gym. I started taking muscle supplements. I also got a tattoo because having a tattoo makes you look attractive for gay men. Having a tattoo exudes masculinity.

Ram’s experience of rejection within the gay community in his new cultural environment sheds light on the issue that there is also discrimination among gay men and that preference towards gay men who have a mesomorph body is evident. Generally, the concept of looking lean, muscled, and fit among gay men is also a product of hegemonic masculinity, dictating that every gay man should have this kind of physique since this is an ideal body shape for gay men (Baker, 2003). If one wanted to communicate their identities to the gay community and be part of it, every gay man should embody these preferred physical attributes. In fact, in one study conducted by Tran et al. (2020), the researchers found that young gay and bisexual men in Massachusetts preferred an ideal body type of muscular and thin because having one’s physically attractive body can attract romantic and sexual partners. While such perception can be held valid among gay men, it also creates pressure for other gay men to gain muscle and have an attractive body. Otherwise, they would not fit in the gay community.

Therefore, it can be argued that the gay community in Bangkok may also “pressure gay men to negotiate who they are according to hegemonic masculinity in order to compensate for their same-sex sexual preference.” Consequently, “some gay men may be pressured to work out their body images in order to act, behave, and perform who they are according to hegemonic masculinity” (Eguchi, 2009, pp. 194, 196). Such preference towards having a mesomorph body within Bangkok’s gay community may have an impact on how Ram would negotiate his belonging in the community. However, Ram took his rejection in a positive way not only to fit in the new community but also to improve himself.

Furthermore, it is also worth to mention that although the gay community in Bangkok may impose preferences towards straight-acting and fit gay men, this preference is only personal. Given that gay
spaces in Bangkok have become commercialized and westernized (Ruting, 2008) they also offer specialized places to cater to gay men who have different preferences towards other gay men and sexual activities. These places may serve as safe places also for gay men who may be rejected by other gay men because they did not have the physical attributes that they are looking for in a gay man.

7. Conclusion
The present study, which uses the theoretical frame of queer intercultural communication, explores the labor migration decisions of two highly skilled Filipino gay men and how such migration in Bangkok, Thailand shaped and influenced their identity and sexuality within the Global South context. The findings suggest that personal, professional, and social factors shaped the decision among highly skilled Filipino gay men to come to and work in Bangkok. Filipino gay men, who may be deprived of the affordances of safe gay spaces in the Philippines, perceived that working in Bangkok was liberating as they got to be accommodated by a gay community that is accepting and welcoming. Working in Bangkok means that they do not only address their financial difficulties but also develop professionally by gaining experience and getting new skills and knowledge in the new working environment. Moreover, as highly skilled, these Filipino gay men took advantage of their professional skills to engage in various sexual activities within Bangkok's gay community, giving them the opportunity to understand and explore more of their sexuality. Being highly skilled and having a job in Bangkok provides them the means to participate in gay activities and fit into the gay community.

Given that the intersections of sexuality and migration among gay men can be viewed through the lens of queer intercultural communication, this study adds to the growing literature on and contributes to the theorization of queer intercultural communication. This study advances our understanding of the intersectionality of queer, migration, and communication studies from the perspectives of highly skilled Filipino gay men within the Global South-South and a non-Western context. The findings of the study point out that gay men’s migration within the Global South-South context, specifically, highly skilled Filipino gay men in Bangkok, can be linked to personal, professional, and social reproductions. In other words, the absence of job opportunities, equality, and safe spaces in their home country is an essential factor of their migration. Bangkok would be the only place they perceived to have these opportunities available for them. Working in Bangkok provides them the venue to address and fulfill their personal, professional, and social needs. Thus, the presence of these opportunities in their destination country requires them to be highly skilled and working so they would have the means to participate and negotiate their belonging in the new cultural environment.

Generally, for gay men, Bangkok is seen as a place where it can likely satisfy their affective and sexual needs. It can also be a place where it does provide not only a safe place to recreate themselves but also a place where they can express their professional identity, get identity validations, and integrate themselves into the new environment. This is particularly important since the culture in their host country is different from the ones they had back in their home country. This also implies that cities that are homophobic, although there is an affordance of economic production, are likely to be avoided by gay men.

As a sexual migration destination, Bangkok plays a vital role in understanding and empowering gay men and other members of the LGBTQIA+. Although these gay spaces have become gentrified and commodified, they remain a place that serves as a sanctuary and a place where there is a sense of community and belonging. These gay spaces become a gay haven where gay men and other members of the LGBTQIA+ are rendered visible.

Thus, this study highlights that looking at the issues on identity and belonging from the gay men’s perspectives enhances our understanding of the multiple gender identities and allows us to see a holistic consideration of the issues that contribute to the study of queer intercultural communication. Their experiences and communication practices of belonging in the new culture
and the new environment provide a different insight and a deeper understanding into the study of the nuances of sexuality, migration, and communication.

Lastly, future studies should also examine the lives of other members of the LGBTQIA+ community and how they view themselves as members of the LGBTQIA+ in Bangkok, how they construct or reconstruct their identity and sexuality, how they negotiate their belonging in the new cultural environment, and how their labor migration to Bangkok change their perspectives of who and what they are. Focusing only on the lives and experiences of gay men is an apparent exclusion of other LGBTQIA+ people. Their stories may surely contribute to the study of queer intercultural communication, allowing us to deeply understand how LGBTQIA+ people communicate their sexuality in the new cultural environment.

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**Note**
1. The term “queer” is used to describe inclusively all sexual and gender identities of people other than straight and cisgender.

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