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ARTICLE

Between silence and voicing out: Migrant organizations navigating online and offline realities‡

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Abstract

This article investigates why moments of *semiotic silence*, or minimal engagement, occur in Facebook practices among Filipino migrant workers engaged in grassroots organizations working for migrants' rights. We investigate how members and leaders of these organizations subjectively and intersubjectively assess moments of semiotic silence through their discourses. Taking a sociolinguistically grounded chronotopic approach, we show how they make sense of these moments by invoking a multiplicity of space-times related to sociopolitical constraints, their working situation, communication with family, and the organizing of migrants. This study provides empirical data, highlighting the importance of identity, materiality, and media ideology in understanding grassroots social media practices and political engagement. On this basis, we come to understand a broader range of ways in which migrant workers use or do not use social media in relation to community involvement and public discourse. (Social media engagement, grassroots organizing, chronotope, identity construction, media ideology, materiality, migrants' rights)

Introduction

On December 23, 2022, the first author, Yuyan, visited Chater Road in Hong Kong to learn about Filipino migrant domestic workers (MDWs). It was a Sunday, their one day off after a week of work in their employers' homes. Along the street, groups of MDWs gathered, engaged in various activities, and sent parcels back home. Yuyan observed flags representing different organizations. A friend from an NGO explained that these were grassroots organizations led by migrants themselves,

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which often organize activities advocating for migrants' rights and provide welfare to other migrant workers to support them in navigating the challenges they face in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, the organizations' and members' engagement are also often tied to broader concerns, including care for their families and the political situation back in their home country. As they walked, Yuyan met Alexis, a leader of one of these organizations, who shared her experience as a MDW for over twenty years. Alexis encouraged Yuyan to follow their organizational Facebook account for updates on activities and campaigns, marking the beginning of Yuyan's online ethnography.

Observing the vibrant gatherings and activities on Chater Road, Yuyan anticipated similar online engagement from migrant community members on organizational Facebook pages. However, contrary to her expectations, these migrants, despite offline involvement, did not engage much with these pages. While organizations actively posted updates and calls to action, member responses were either absent or minimal. If they engaged, members typically only 'liked' posts, and if they 'shared' them, they did so with little or even no customization (i.e. copying and pasting the sentences from the original posts). Surprised by the disparity between offline and online participation, Yuyan expressed concern to the second author, Lydia, about the viability of her research on the language of migrant communities on social media. Lydia considered Yuyan's observations of minimal engagement on social media in relation to her own research which had been exploring both the SIGNIFICANCE OF and CONSTRAINTS ON the discourses of migrant-led, grassroots organizations (see Catedral 2022, 2025). After reflecting on their overlapping research interests and their ethnographic engagements with the community, Yuyan and Lydia decided to write about the reasons behind these *semiotic silences* and the way they are interpreted by leaders and members of the organizations. As we show below, this allows us to highlight the importance of understanding community members as everyday people navigating a multiplicity of offline and online space-times to explain why and how they use or do not use social media in relation to political participation. As such, this article not only explains the complex web of social meanings and positionings behind migrant workers' minimal engagement online but also contributes to scholarship on digital activism and questions of context collapse more broadly.

Political (dis)engagement and online contexts

Scholarship on social media and political engagement has often focused on the issue of *slacktivism*, that is, the gap between how people post about political issues on social media vs. their disengagement with these same political issues in offline spaces (Morozov 2009; Christensen 2011; Kristofferson, White, & Peloza 2014; Vissers & Stolle 2014; Bitman 2023). Within these debates, the efficacy of online political engagement is variously questioned and supported, but less attention is paid to those political actors who are DISENGAGED IN ONLINE SPACES.

Turning to the scholarship that has investigated online disengagement then, we see that the focus is primarily on marginalized and oppressed groups whose online 'silence' is shaped by surveillance (Honari 2018; de Vries & Majlaton 2021),

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a lack of access to technology (Nemer & Tsikerdekis 2017), and broader forms of social and class-based exclusion (Powell, Bryne, & Dailey 2010; Helsper 2012). Interestingly, rather than focusing on the dichotomy between online vs. offline spaces to understand political (dis)engagement, these scholars highlight the continuity of marginalization across offline and online spaces for these social actors (e.g. Helsper 2012). Further, rather than imposing externally constructed labels such as *slacktivists* onto those who are politically (dis)engaged online, a number of scholars have chosen to focus on how social actors themselves actively navigate, negotiate, and understand their political (dis)engagement in the offline-online nexus (Honari 2018; Honari & Muis 2021). Our article is an attempt to contribute to scholarship in this vein by exploring how Filipino MDWs in grassroots organizations understand their experiences and constraints across multiple contexts, and in relation to their political (dis)engagement online.

In carrying out this research, we draw on theories from the field of sociolinguistics that theorize the connections between silence, semiosis, ideology, and context at the offline-online nexus. Sociolinguistic studies of social media have given particular attention to how people utilize multimodal and linguistic creativity along with platform affordances to transform and repurpose earlier semiotic content and amplify their messages (e.g. Pennycook 2007; Georgakopoulou 2015; Zappavigna 2015; Giaxoglou 2018; Vishnyakova, Dobroradnykh, Aleksandrova, & Klimanova 2019). However, less attention has been paid to those moments when messages are not amplified, or when earlier semiotic content is only minimally transformed. Guided by the long history of sociolinguistic theorization of silence as meaningful through its relationship to particular contexts (Basso 1970; Jaworski 1992; Kurzon 1998; Ferguson 2003; Mills 2006), we propose to focus on these cases of minimal engagement or semiotic silence on social media.

Just as the meaning of silence is closely tied to context, so the meaning of digitally mediated communication is closely tied to a multiplicity of both offline and online contexts. Scholars have theorized the *contexts* of online communication in various ways, including proposing the notion of *context collapse* (Marwick & boyd 2010) to argue that communicating on social media is a process in which these technologies 'collapse multiple contexts and bring together commonly distinct audiences' (Marwick & boyd 2010:115). Some sociolinguists have examined how users make use of language choice and other forms of semiosis to navigate context collapse (Androutsopoulos 2014), while others demonstrate that in spite of context collapse users continue to have an acute awareness of contextual norms for communication on social media (Szabla & Blommaert 2020; Tagg, Seargent, & Brown 2017:ch. 1; see also Hine 2000). In this study, we find context collapse to be a useful way of explaining some of the reasons behind the moments of semiotic silences we examine. However, we also recognize that a more holistic account of these silences requires an understanding of the wider range of intersecting contexts that inform them. For this reason, we find it useful to engage with the notion of post-digital meaning-making, which has been brought into the study of language and communication in digital contexts (Tagg & Lyons 2022; Bhatt & Gourlay 2024; Wang & Canagarajah 2024). In the work of these scholars, the focus is less on what is NEW or DISTINCT about digital contexts, and more on the ways that digital contexts of communication have become a normal part of social life that intersect and overlap with offline contexts in the

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everyday. Taken as a whole, this scholarship on digital/social media communication and context highlights the importance of attending to the multiplicity of relevant contexts involved in social media communication, and the subjective awareness that social media users have about these contexts.

A chronotopic approach

In order to carry out this type of research, we take a chronotopic approach to our analysis of context. Originally proposed by Bakhtin (1981) to capture the inseparability of space and time, the notion of the *chronotope* has been taken up by sociolinguists as a 'precise and detailed, mobile unit of context' that emphasizes space and time, as well as the norms (Blommaert 2017:95) and 'types' of people associated with these space-times (Agha 2007). While a number of scholars have used the notion of chronotope to analyze different aspects of context in digital spaces (Koven & Marques 2017; Procházka 2018; De Fina 2022; Sanei 2022), we find Lyons & Tagg's (2019) approach particularly well-suited to this study. Through their investigation of migrants' SMS messaging with those in the homeland, Lyons & Tagg (2019:660) highlight how chronotopes can be used to account for the multiplicity of intersecting contexts, and the 'particular relationship between time and space … involved in contextualising online utterances' (see also Gumperz 1982). They propose the term *mobile chronotopes* to capture the ways in which particular digital space-times become associated with particular norms (i.e. the friendly and immediate communicative norms associated with a particular Viber chat between transnational friends). They also show how these mobile chronotopes intersect with the immediate, material chronotopes in which participants are located as they are messaging others (i.e. being with one's children and taking and sending photos of them to transnational relatives), and with broader sociocultural chronotopes (i.e. spatiotemporally located notions of Chinese traditional norms).

The framework laid out by Lyons & Tagg (2019) draws on and contributes to broader scholarly conversations about the interaction across and between chronotopes (Perrino 2007; Pritzker & Perrino 2021). This includes the discursive construction of mass-mediated, historical and sociocultural chronotopes (e.g. Agha 2007; Koven 2013; Wirtz 2016), their intersection with material chronotopes that are experienced in an embodied way (e.g. Divita 2014; Karimzad & Catedral 2022), and interactional chronotopes that result from the co-construction of norms (Blommaert & De Fina 2017). In the case of our study, then, Lyons & Tagg's (2019) framework enables us to account for how the semiotic silence we found on social media reflects our migrant worker participants' navigation of multiple intersecting chronotopes including the political dimensions of the historical space-times in which they find themselves, the material constraints of their immediate space-times as domestic workers, and the spatiotemporal norms for online communication that they construct through interaction on social media over time.

Further, to investigate the emic perspectives of our participants, we use this chronotopic framework to account for the identities and ideologies of our participants. More specifically, we use a chronotopic approach to identity (Blommaert & De Fina 2017) to investigate how our participants discursively and intersubjectively negotiate their identities (e.g. Bucholtz & Hall 2005; De Fina 2011) in relation to

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a multiplicity chronotopes. We also investigate our participants' media ideologies through such a framework. While it is a part of a broader focus on semiotic and language ideologies (Irvine & Gal 2000; Keane 2003), Gershon (2010:391) defines *media ideology* more specifically as 'what people believe about how the medium affects or should affect the message'. If we consider social media as more than just a 'medium', but also as a space-time comprised of many other normative space-times (Szabla & Blommaert 2020), it becomes clear that media ideologies and discourses about social media are also chronotopically ordered (Procházka 2018; Lyons & Tagg 2019; Sanei 2022). Examining both media ideologies and identity construction through a chronotopic framework enables us to delve into these MDWs' complex imaginaries of social media and also uncover the bridge that links online practices and identities to multiple contexts as they are experienced by these workers.

Method and data

While some scholars emphasize the online space more in their online-offline ethnography (Hine 2000; boyd 2008), in this study, we adopt *blended linguistic ethnography*, in which 'the ethnography itself takes place offline' (Tagg & Lyons 2021:736). In line with post-digital perspectives outlined above, the prioritization of offline interactions with MDWs in grassroots organizations allows us to consider their online behaviors of semiotic silences as part of their broader interactions in their everyday life. Both authors are involved in long-term and ongoing participant observation in the activities of organizations in Hong Kong led by Filipino MDWs. These organizations can be called 'progressive organizations' in the sense that their purpose is to work for the rights and welfare of Filipino migrants in Hong Kong, and for their family members in the Philippines. In this sense, they also work towards social change that would better address the needs of migrants and their family members. For the second author, Lydia, this involvement has been ongoing since 2019 and has evolved to encompass multiple research projects, close friendships with a number of the leaders of these organizations, and solidarity work with these organizations on discrimination they face from the Hong Kong government, and political suppression they face from the Philippines government. The first author, Yuyan, joined Lydia in her ongoing participant observation in September 2022, becoming friends and interacting with overlapping, but also distinct groups of MDWs within the community. Starting in December 2022, Yuyan began conducting interviews with organizational leaders and members to explore the phenomenon of semiotic silence, while simultaneously monitoring the Facebook activity of these organizations and their members. Given the sensitive nature of the material, we discussed the findings with organizational leaders and participants to ensure they approved our framing and publication.

In addition to our ongoing ethnography, Yuyan took the lead in collecting online data and interviews that specifically related to the issue of political disengagement on social media. This involved monitoring and reviewing past posts for three organizational Facebook pages from Filipino MDW organizations. Specifically, this included taking screenshots of organizational posts and counting the number of reactions and shares, as well as looking into the semiotic details of how these posts were shared and the reactions they received. Note that, although Yuyan received consent to write

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about the online activity of those organizational members she friended on Facebook, we have omitted names and profiles of the organizational and individual accounts for the sake of privacy.

Yuyan also followed up with a number of these individuals on Sunday in Chater Road and asked them if they would be willing to be interviewed. For this article, data were transcribed from nine semistructured interviews conducted in English with six leaders and three members. Participants demonstrated fluency in English, reflecting the Philippines' focus on English education for labor export (Lorente 2017). Furthermore, given the postcolonial contexts for English in both Hong Kong and the Philippines, it is normal for the leaders of these organizations to use English to communicate their concerns to the Hong Kong government and others in Hong Kong society. Additionally, although one of the participants was not a leader of the organization, she was also used to speaking in English with her employer in her daily work life. Each interview included questions about these individuals' duties and engagement in the organizations, discussion about their online (dis)engagement with the organizational pages, and questions about how they explain and assess semiotic silence in relation to organizational posts. Yuyan and Lydia analyzed the data together, taking an ethnographically grounded discourse analytic approach, prioritizing participants' discourses as sites of media ideologies and identity work while incorporating ethnographic observations from fieldwork to understand the interactional and broader context in which these discourses are situated. To identify chronotopes, we looked for space-times that were relevant in discourses and practices of individuals and organizations we were working with. Further, we examine how participants position themselves and rationalize semiotic silences through evaluative discourses. To ensure the reliability of our findings, we cross-verify participants' statements and evaluations through follow-up questions and comparisons across interviews and ethnographic observations. In this way, we illustrate the dynamic process through which participants' media ideologies and identities are shaped within a specific 'polynomic social arena' (Blommaert 2018:50) related to the way they experience and interpret the multiple chronotopes in which they are situated.

Collective engagement in grassroots organizations of Filipino migrant workers in Hong Kong

8.9% of the Hong Kong workforce are MDWs, among whom 56% are Filipinos.[1] Since the 1970s, the Philippine and Hong Kong governments have coordinated a *labor export program* (Lindio-McGovern 2004), in which Filipinos are given temporary, contract-based visas to migrate to Hong Kong and work as live-in domestic workers in the homes of private employers. These arrangements have often led to exploitation, with MDWs facing excessive working hours, unsuitable living conditions, underpayment, and abuse in Hong Kong (Ladegaard 2016; Mission for Migrant Workers 2024), while also being charged fees and facing varying requirements to remit their salaries from the Philippines government (Rodriguez 2002). In response to these working conditions, groups of Filipino migrants have been organizing themselves since the 1980s to advocate for the rights and welfare of their fellow migrants. Scholars have noted the impressive reach of these types of organizations, which

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carry out actions in Hong Kong in relation to both local and international issues (Constable 2009). Others have highlighted the uniqueness of how these organizations and their networks engage the politics of the homeland in terms of resistance (Rodriguez 2002), and by framing their own migration as 'forced' because of a lack of economic opportunities in the Philippines (Wui & Delias 2015).

From our ethnographic engagements with these organizations, we have observed how their leaders meticulously coordinate campaigns, ensuring tasks are properly allocated. They initiate educational sessions during Sunday gatherings on pedestrian bridges and blocked off roads—a common meeting place for MDWs in Hong Kong—to raise members' awareness about their rights. Members also voluntarily contribute their time and efforts in organizational activities such as organizing Sunday gatherings and preparing hearty meals, crafting propaganda materials, and choreographing political performances and campaigns. During these interactions, beliefs, norms, and solidarity within and across grassroots organizations are built and reinforced. Even amidst the demanding schedules of being MDWs, members and leaders unfailingly gather on Chater Road every Sunday, bringing a vibrant energy and unwavering commitment to their cause, showcasing their dedication to organizational activities. Meanwhile, the organizations have Facebook accounts to amplify their messages and attract new members, due to its widespread use among Filipinos.[2]

Make sense of semiotic silence

Observing semiotic silence online

Before investigating the discursive uptakes of semiotic silence from individuals in the grassroots organizations, we first illustrate practices that we consider to be moments of semiotic silences in organizational Facebook engagement. Note that users can choose to see organizational content by liking the organizational Facebook page as a whole, and they can also engage with specific organizational Facebook posts by 'reacting' (Facebook now offers seven emojis for reactions), commenting, or reposting (i.e. 'sharing') a post with or without additional commentary. Our online ethnography found that the organizational posts frequently received minimal engagement overall—particularly considering the number of people who have 'liked' the organizational page as a whole, and the number of people who are members of these organizations. Some examples are provided in the figures below, that relate to a campaign to abolish the Overseas Employment Certificate (OEC). The OEC requires Filipino workers in Hong Kong to pay mandatory fees to the Philippines government and go through various bureaucratic processes to ensure the Philippines government will allow them to return to Hong Kong for work after they visit their families in the Philippines.

A screenshot of an organizational post related to the OEC issue (see Figure 1) shows that it received very little engagement: only twenty Facebook users 'liked' the post and twelve users 'shared' it, even though the post mentioned that around 150 people had joined the action in front of the Philippines Consulate. Also, from Figures 2 to 4, which are extracted from the organization's public posts on their Facebook pages, it shows that over twenty-five members were involved in the same issue through offline participation. Based on our offline ethnography, even more members

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Figure 1. Organizational post for the OEC campaign.

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Figure 2. Members' discussion on the OEC issue.

participated in other scattered gatherings that were not included in the photos. In this sense, we consider members' generally low level of engagement on Facebook (members' comments, likes, and shares) to be a case of semiotic silence online. Additionally, we also consider those cases where members engage the organizational posts but in a relatively minimal way. For instance, some posts receive more engagement than the example shown in Figure 1, but this engagement is mostly in terms of 'reactions' or 'shares' rather than comments (see Figure 5). Such actions take less effort. Furthermore, when sharing organizational posts, users typically share with no customization (see Figure 6), and when they comment they often repost the original text with no customization (see Figure 7). Thus, we can think of all of these as instances of semiotic silence because they reflect relatively low levels of engagement from organizational members.

Making sense of semiotic silence from a member's perspective

To better understand emic perspectives on the semiotic silences described above, we now analyze discourse from an interview with a new member of one of the organizations, Ruby. Yuyan first met Ruby at a Sunday gathering of the organization, which was also Ruby's first time attending an organizational activity offline. Ruby was introduced to the organization by a long-time friend and high school classmate from the Philippines. During the first meeting, Ruby expressed that she joined the organization due to her alignment with its beliefs in solidarity and collective strength, given their marginalized social positions as MDWs. By the time of the interview, Ruby had been involved with the organization for about two months. The interview with Ruby was conducted at Yuyan's apartment. Since Ruby and Yuyan had already become friends, after the interview, the conversations continued. After

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Figure 3. Members' petition signing against the OEC.



Figure 4. Organizational advocacy and member engagement in the OEC campaign.

knowing the interview topic was about Facebook political engagement, Ruby presented her Facebook account to Yuyan to show her account is non-public status, and then she said her online political actions were basically confined to "sending migrant news through Messenger", a more private and instant messaging feature within Facebook, and that she mostly keeps 'silent' in the public online sphere, particularly on the organization's pages. She noted that she would occasionally react to organizational posts by clicking 'like' to indicate her acknowledgement or privately share posts with close friends.

In the examples below, we analyze Ruby's own account of her semiotic silence online in relation to three chronotopes that she makes relevant in her discourses (in addition to the immediate chronotope of the interview): the chronotope of

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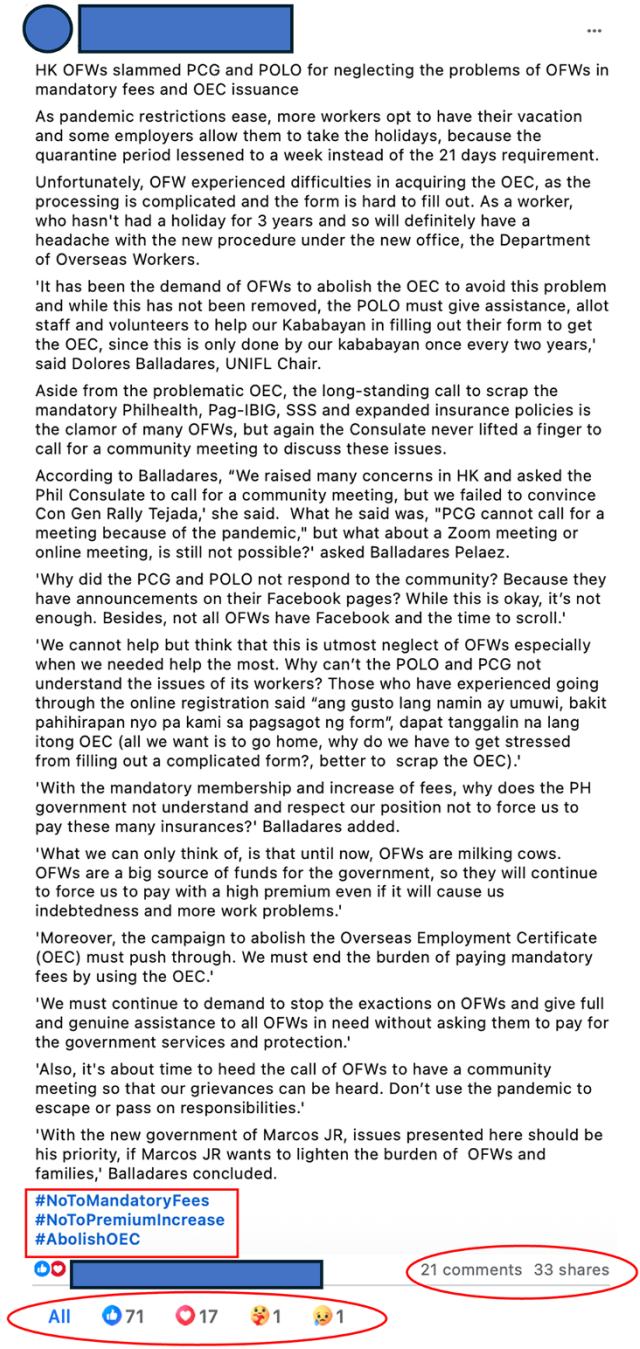


Figure 5. Organizational post for the OEC campaign.

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Figure 6. Member's sharing without any comment.

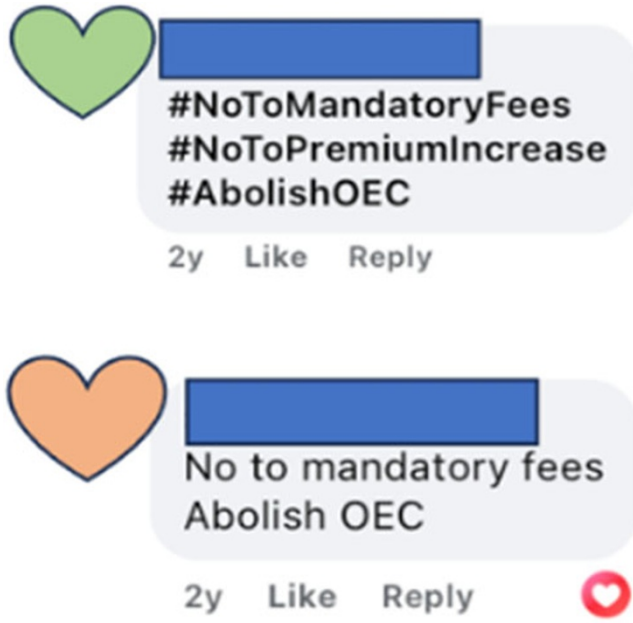


Figure 7. Members' comments using the same hashtags and slogan from the organizational OEC campaign.

red-tagging, the chronotope of live-in MDWs' work life, and the chronotope of Facebook. The chronotope of 'red-tagging' is a sociohistorical chronotope related to the political suppression of Filipinos. Although 'red-tagging' continues under the current President Marcos of the Philippines, in the case of our data, this chronotope relates to the particular norms associated with this tactic under President Rodrigo Duterte, as well as its impacts in Hong Kong. 'Red-tagging' refers to the practice of government and pro-government groups accusing activists, development workers, journalists, and others defending the rights of marginalized groups of having links to communist rebels in the context of the ongoing civil war in the Philippines (Buso 2024). The discursive and semiotic dimensions of 'red-tagging' are often expressed on social media, where images of and information about rights defenders or community workers is appropriated from their own social media accounts, and then reconfigured by government or pro-government groups to create multimodal indexical links that associate rights defenders and community workers with terrorism[3] (Calabias 2022; Buso 2024). Such semiotic practices have real-world consequences

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as they threaten individuals' safety (many who are red-tagged are later killed or arrested), while also restricting freedom of speech and community work by instilling fear.[4] The more specific chronotope of red-tagging relevant to our participants relates to events starting from 2020. In this year, President Duterte signed the Anti-Terror Law of the Philippines, further institutionalizing red-tagging, legitimizing state violence, and expanding to an absurd degree those who could be treated as "terrorists" under Philippines Law (Imbong 2023). In this same year, organizations and leaders of progressive Filipino migrants in Hong Kong also started to be red-tagged—despite the fact that they were operating outside of the Philippines.[5] Furthermore, leading up to the Philippines Elections, in May 2022, such accusations and attacks against political Filipino migrant organizations in Hong Kong increased, and the organizations actively responded to and spoke out against this 'red-tagging'. Thus, the space-time of a hostile government whose agencies and supporters were ready to accuse migrants' rights defenders was prominent in the minds of our participants, whom Yuyan interviewed in late 2022.

The second chronotope of MDWs' work relates to these workers' immediate, material experiences of living and working in their employers' house, under their employers' rules, dependent upon the food and rest space provided by these employers for six days a week (Mission for Migrant Workers 2024). Notably, although this chronotope is experienced materially, the organizations also bring this chronotope into their discourses, as their political discourse includes making demands for MDWs to be given suitable accommodations, protected daily rest periods, and food allowances that are sufficient for them to eat nutritious and sustaining foods.

Finally, the chronotope of Facebook is the space-time of this platform as it is used by Filipino migrant workers for relaxation after a long day of work, and to stay in touch with those in the homeland. As previous scholarship has shown, this is a space-time characterized by personal sharing and inquiries: that is, attempts to maintain connection with left-behind family members and to portray one's life abroad to those in the homeland in an ideal way (see Madianou & Miller 2012; Aguirre & Davies 2015). While this chronotope is not prominent in the organizational discourses, it does seem to influence the way Ruby and others perceive and act on Facebook as individuals. However, as we see in the examples below, the norms associated with the chronotope of Facebook are being reconfigured as they intersect with other chronotopes.

In the following examples, we can observe how these chronotopes interact with one another in Ruby's discourses on her semiotic silences. Notably, these chronotopes were relevant, not only in Ruby's discourses, but also in the discourses of other members interviewed about their semiotic silences online.

An invisible online member and caring mother under the 'red-tagging' policy

Ruby's online behavior is influenced by her perception of social media platforms as 'dangerous places' for political engagement. Therefore, she is not willing to show her political identity in public online spaces. Throughout the interview, she mentioned several times that the reasons for her semiotic silence were primarily about her concerns of being red-tagged and the stories she had heard from friends and family of individuals who had been red-tagged and later threatened or killed. Excerpt (1)

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provides some of her reflections on her concerns about 'red-tagging' and her own political engagement on social media.

(1) Ruby: There's a lot of (.) bad happenings in the Philippines. I will not say about the world. I'm saying in the Philippines (.) you know, ah (.) red tagging. Yes, actually, in the Philippines, they can use (.) your face. They can use your... your IDENTITY. They can use EVERYTHING (.) against you, if they saw a post in your social media. Activism in the Philippines, they HATE it. They hated (..) that. They HATED the words. They HATED the person who is ACTIVIST. Because if you said an activist, it means you are a TERRORIST. But it's REALLY NOT. We are just having our, you know, kind of... our... So that's HOW I use social media on this kind of organization.

In (1), Ruby invokes the chronotope of red-tagging. The way she explains this issue situates it within a particular space-time, emphasizing the Filipino context of political repression: as in "I will not say about the world, I'm saying in the Philippines" and in "Activism in the Philippines, they hate it". This reveals that her semiotic silence is closely related to her position as a Filipino in the current political climate. Ruby portrays the strong institutional power against activism within this chronotope. She employs an intense negative emotional word "hate" and the strong accusation ("It means you are a terrorist") to indicate how she perceives the official attitude toward activism. However, she soon distances herself from this perspective by saying "But it's really not" to challenge the dominant narrative in the space-time of the interview.

We also see how Ruby's invocation of the chronotope of red-tagging in the Philippines allows her to explain her media ideologies about Facebook—not only as a place for communication with family—but also as a dangerous space-time for political engagement. We observed that many members and some leaders have a norm of using Facebook in convivial ways to connect with their family members (tagging family members in photos of their lives in Hong Kong, posting pictures of their children graduating with messages of how proud they are, etc.). However, when Ruby considers political engagement, a new chronotope of Facebook and a corresponding new set of norms come to the forefront. The new norms associated with Facebook in this context, include institutionalized surveillance, and the possibility that your engagement with organizational posts may be taken and multimodally reconfigured by others to accuse individuals of terrorism. Ruby demonstrates her awareness of these risks in her comments by saying "They can use your identity. They can use everything against you, if they saw a post in your social media". The quantifier "everything" emphasizes her fear of how any semiotic material related to politics that she posts online could be used against her. Thus, semiotic silence and minimal engagement with organizational posts emerges as her response to the institutionalized surveillance and 'red-tagging' ("So that's how I use social media on this kind of organization").

In excerpt (2), Ruby further reflects on her reasons for semiotic silence online, which relates to a clash between the chronotope of red-tagging and the chronotope of Facebook, where it is seen as a means of maintaining contact with the homeland. While Ruby is particularly cautious in sharing any information on her Facebook feed,

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other migrants we interacted with use convivial posts about everyday activities on Facebook as a means of maintaining some sort of connection and information sharing with those in the homeland. Below, Ruby reflects on a HYPOTHETICAL situation in which the two chronotopes come into conflict with each other, and her political posts become a source of information about her that impacts how others in the homeland interact with her family.

(2) Ruby: As what I told you a while ago, I don't want my son to get..., you know. "Oh Bill, your mother is on that kind of organization. Is SHE? ↑ Is she an ACTIVIST? ↑Is she like? ↑" I... I don't want them to question my son. That will cause my son, ah (.) a bit of WORRY. Yeah. So, I'm doing my job on that organization, OUTSIDE social media. I prefer to do it voluntarily outside the social media. I don't want to put it on my...on my social media, because I am protecting (.) also my son.

Here, she imagines how her Facebook audience might react after knowing her identity as a member of a progressive, grassroots organization, quoting a possible conversation, where they approach her son to ask, "[She's] on that kind of organization. Is SHE? ↑ Is she an ACTIVIST? ↑". Ruby uses a rising tone and increased volume for the words "she" and "activist" to voice the shock and even anger these imagined people in the homeland might have in confronting her son, and to express her own anxiety about such encounters in the context of the interview. Notably, Ruby does not clearly specify an individual or a group who is likely to criticize her identity. Instead, she uses the generic deictic "they" to refer to an unspecified Facebook audience in the homeland. Although Ruby holds a private Facebook account and all her friends on Facebook are permitted by herself, she still feels anxiety and discomfort. We can understand this anxiety as partially emerging from her distrust of Facebook, which comes from her understanding of communication on "social network sites" as "persistent, replicable, scalable, searchable and shareable" (Szabla & Blommaert 2020:253)—particularly dangerous features in the chronotope of red-tagging. However, it is also possible that she perceives some of her friends on Facebook as an unknown and unintended audience (c.f. Marwick & boyd 2010). In this case, the unknown nature of her audience is not only because of the characteristics of Facebook, but also because of the changing political context in the Philippines, where activism was being increasingly associated with terrorism, and pro-government supporters were increasingly involving themselves with red-tagging. In this context, remaining an invisible online member reflects the conflict between her member identity and her role as a caring mother. As a mother, she chooses to prioritize her son's safety, spare him from anxiety, and allow him to avoid navigating the complex web of contexts that include: her Facebook posts, her organizational engagement in Hong Kong, the conversations between him and those around him in the Philippines, and the broader political context of 'red-tagging'.

In these excerpts from Ruby, we can observe that her media ideologies of Facebook as an unsafe space-time for Filipinos to engage politically, the conflict between her identity as a mother and as a member of progressive, grassroots organization, and her conscious choice of semiotic silence are all informed by fear of a certain type of context collapse. However, as suggested by our analysis above,

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while this context collapse is partially about the bringing together of distinct contexts (i.e. her organizational engagement in Hong Kong and her family life in the Philippines), it is also about the ways in which the chronotope of red-tagging has fundamentally reconfigured these other contexts—making it more dangerous for distinct contexts to be brought together, making previously familiar audiences unfamiliar, and making the affordances of Facebook more sinister. Under such conditions, self-censorship online emerges as a protective strategy.

For Ruby, this media ideology extends beyond individual posting practices and beyond the Duterte Presidency but does not prevent her from continuing to engage in organizational campaigns offline. For instance, in the commemoration of the Philippines Martial Law in Hong Kong, Ruby helped to hold the banner on the front line among the fellow members in the street. When asked about the risk of this offline campaign, she acknowledged the sensitivity of the topic in the Philippines—particularly because the son of the Martial Law dictator, Marcos Jr., had been elected president in 2022. However, she felt relatively safe in engaging in this activity in Hong Kong. To mitigate risks, she had got permission from the leaders in the organization that her picture and her face would not appear in organizational Facebook posts.

A tired migrant domestic worker and convivial netizen

Another reason Ruby gives for her semiotic silence relates to the chronotope of MDWs' work life and how it influences her to use Facebook as a space-time for relaxation. In Ruby's case in particular, she shared that she works from 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.—not an atypical schedule for MDWs (Mission for Migrant Workers 2023). This makes her tired after a long day of work, and she turns to Facebook as a way to relax. Using social media as a way to relax is particularly useful for her, as MDWs are required to live with their employers. This means that even after she finishes work for the day, she is still in her employer's home and cannot easily meet with friends or engage in other activities outside. Our broader ethnographic observations confirm that many of the other members and leaders use Facebook as a place to entertain themselves or connect with family during the week, since they have to stay inside their employers' homes. Given this work-life reality, her other media ideology views Facebook primarily as a space for relaxation, a point she also broadens to other MDWs, as seen in excerpt (3) below.

(3) Ruby: Maybe sometimes the people are just... they are JUST enjoying the social media for ENJOYABLE MOMENTS, not for the important matters... Because as sometimes we don't want to get involved in very complicated issues. ME, actually, I am using my social media... as a SIMPLE LIVING (.) person.

In (3), Ruby generalizes that "people" use social media for "enjoyable moments" rather than "important matters", suggesting a broader ideology about social media as a space for entertainment rather than political engagement. Then she rescales from "people" to "we" to show how this is even more true for MDWs, whose work schedules dominate their time and energy. These MDWs' positions in the space-time of their employers' homes, imposes material constraints on their ability to

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engage with political posts from the organizations, and further underscores Ruby's emphasis on the need for relaxation and recreation. Lastly, she downscales to the individual level by shifting the pronoun to "me", explaining that her media ideology involves using Facebook as a space for "simple living" rather than a MDW or a member of the organization. This aligns with findings from previous sociolinguistic studies of MDWs, which show that their language practices are influenced and regulated by their labor identities, as they are situated within hierarchical labor conditions that position them—both physically and discursively—as individuals whose language practices are constrained and even prohibited (Lorente 2017; Guinto 2019, 2023).

Offline organizational engagement as the best choice for a responsible member

In fact, ethnographic observations and ongoing discussions reveal that Ruby is actively involved with campaigns, boycotts, and protest actions, addressing both migrant issues in Hong Kong and political concerns in the Philippines on Sundays. Even during the week, she promotes organizational activities and beliefs to new Filipino acquaintances in offline spaces, such as supermarkets—a frequently visited place for MDWs. Ruby herself notes that "BUT I am here in the organization. When the organization have the mission. I am the one who is (.), you know, I am helping them also".

In this way she separates her organizational work from the space-time of Facebook, and links it to the space-times of offline practices to emphasize what she has done for the organization. By highlighting that her offline contribution to the organizational campaigns is an alternative and important way to show belonging to the organization, Ruby constructs a responsible member image in the interview and also constructs a fundamental difference between offline engagement and online engagement in terms of the dangers of being red-tagged. Ruby's example stands in stark contrast to the imagined 'slacktivist' who engages politically online because of its ease but is disengaged offline. Instead, her example highlights how for certain grassroots members of political organizations, in particular intersecting chronotopic contexts, committed and consistent offline political engagement may be more possible than online political engagement.

Make sense of semiotic silence from leaders' perspectives

Now, we turn our analysis to the discourses from the leaders of these organizations—who are themselves Filipino MDWs—to explore how they understand and evaluate members' semiotic silences in relation to various space-times and identities. Our findings suggest that all leaders expect more online reactions and interactions from members. In the words of one leader, Daisy, she "encourages members to interact more with the posts". However, our findings also show—not only from the interviews but also from our broader ethnographic engagements—that these leaders' media ideologies show an in-depth understanding of and sensitivity to the chronotopically organized concerns and ideologies of members such as Ruby. Additionally, they make another chronotope relevant in their discourses, which is the space-time of organizing Filipino migrant workers in Hong Kong. The norms for this chronotope include

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prioritizing members' offline engagement over their online engagement, a commitment to understanding and transforming the constraints facing their members, and the expectation that organizing others will be a long-term and incremental process.

Note that Yuyan's interviews with these leaders take place in a larger context, in which they are frequently engaging with researchers, reporters, and others who want to know more about the situation of MDWs. Thus, in these interviews they are positioned and position themselves, rightfully, as experts on the issues they are speaking about. Additionally, given the extensive time that Yuyan spent with migrants on Sundays, and her collaboration on this project with Lydia, who was involved in various solidarity projects combating red-tagging, these leaders viewed her interest in these issues in a positive light, despite their sensitive nature.

Leader's responses to members' concerns about red-tagging

Even without prompting from Yuyan, the leaders themselves recognized that the chronotope of red-tagging was informing members' semiotic silences online. One leader, Lena responded to Yuyan's questions about semiotic silence by noting that "Sometimes they are afraid to give sentiments or to give reaction, because they think that they will also be called TERRORISTS... They will help you, but sometimes in and then in social media, they don't want to express there". This excerpt suggests a view that understands the media ideologies of members such as Ruby who do not want to engage online for fears of being red-tagged, despite their willingness to "help" in offline contexts. When Yuyan explicitly asked about whether members refuse to engage in some online campaigns for fear of being red-tagged, another leader, Sarah, gave the following explanation.

(4) Sarah: Yeah. Yeah. Like some of our members said that, then we will respect that. Because, you know, it's a LONG (.) process until they will understand fully the cause of what we are doing in the social media and as well, their READINESS, as well to face some criticism because whatever they post it in the social media.

Here, similar to the sharing from Lena, we see that Sarah is familiar with members' fears of being red-tagged, and confirms that online posts can often lead to criticism. Given the reality of this situation for MDWs, she notes that as leaders they "respect" the decisions of members not to engage in online posts. She, furthermore, brings in the chronotope of organizing Filipino migrant workers, noting that their respect for the decisions of their members is also rooted in their commitment to a "long process until they [the members] understand" the issues and campaigns, as well as the "long process" involved in members becoming ready "to face some criticism". Within this more encompassing chronotope of organizing Filipino migrants then, leaders like Sarah respect the media ideologies and immediate concerns of members like Ruby, in the sense that they do not try to bring about immediate changes in these members' views. Rather, they operate under the assumption that greater political engagement from members as a whole—whether online or offline—will take time, education, and further organizing.

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Leader's responses to members' constraints in their MDWS' work life

In response to members' semiotic silences because of their busy work life, we see a kind and caring response from Daisy, a leader who plays a prominent role in the organizations. In the excerpt below, she shows her understanding of members' limited interaction, acknowledging the work-life constraints faced by MDWs, as shown in (5).

(5) Daisy: ((Laugh)) Maybe that's the easiest thing to do. Just don't see the poster—like it or share it. Because if you're going to type and give your opinion or your comment, it will take some times. And there are a few people who has time to do that. Maybe many are working during the day, and they just take a glimpse of their Facebook (.) to see what's up, what's new. But they DON'T have the time to give more comments or reactions on the pictures that they see. So they just take a look. Yeah, like it and ignore it.

When asked about members semiotic silences in relation to the organizational posts, Daisy first laughed and led the conversation to a relaxing talking atmosphere. Then she answered the question by foregrounding the members' identities as domestic workers instead of only as members of the organizations. She linked the material constraints and semiotic silences together and pointed out that members need to prioritize work and earning a living over engaging in organizational activities online. She acknowledged that long working hours consume most of their time and sometimes come with restrictions on using the phone and social media.

In (5), time is a recurring issue. To show her understanding of semiotic silences among members, Daisy brings herself and the interviewer to the work chronotope of the MDWs in their employer's home, which is very busy. Rather than focusing on one individual, she uses a variety of linguistic strategies to emphasize the generalizability and understandability of this situation. She uses the deictic pronoun "you" to indicate that people more generally would not be actively involved in online practices when they are in a rush with limited time. She also generates a nomic calibration (Silverstein 1993; Koven 2016) by using a generic statement to describe the member's work-life situation, as in "many are working during the day". Such nomic calibration is a communicative strategy for essentializing typical working conditions of the members and for inviting the alignment of the interviewer. By bringing the conflicting space-time of work as a MDW and space-time of Facebook as a member in the organization, Daisy further highlights the general time limitations MDW face in a way that is similar to Ruby's explanation of her own working schedule. Thus, Daisy not only explains but rationalizes semiotic silence in the current space-time of the interview.

Daisy describes the space-time of Facebook as a place where members can "see what's up and what's new", conceptualizing Facebook primarily for organizational information dissemination rather than active interactions. She acknowledges this media ideology by later on explaining that semiotic silences do not necessarily mean failure if members still see the content of the posts. In Daisy's words, "If the views are okay, then that's fine". Here, Daisy constructs an understanding of semiotic silence based on an alternative interpretation of how Facebook can function and be utilized

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for organizational work, by prioritizing information dissemination over interactive communication. This reveals that Daisy views Facebook more as traditional media rather than a highly interactive space-time.

Beyond this media ideology, Daisy's acceptance of members' semiotic silences online, may also be influenced by the chronotope of organizing Filipino migrant workers in Hong Kong, which normalizes the importance of offline engagement over online engagement. This ideology comes through more clearly in an interview with another leader, Jane, who is more frustrated with members' semiotic silences. She pushes them to engage more online, while trying to maintain her own duties as a MDW and Facebook account manager for the organization. Despite all these frustrations, however, she acknowledges that the organization's overall strategy prioritizes offline engagement over online engagement, noting that "offline interaction and activism are the principal thing". This organizational principle allows Jane to tacitly approve of members' semiotic silences in online spaces.

Overall, through these evaluative discourses, and through their organizing work more broadly, these leaders enact care by showing their understanding of the material and political situations of these members in relation to their MDW identities. They construct a leader identity who understands the whole picture of MDWs' work conditions, and who would stand with them in their difficulties. Furthermore, by highlighting the issue of unregulated working hours, and the issue of red-tagging—both major concerns for their organization—leaders reinforce the importance of their advocacy. Finally, bringing in the chronotope of organizing migrants, and its associated norms, they are able to accept semiotic silences online, as a reflection of the incremental work of organizing, and as less important than member engagement offline.

Conclusions and implications

To sum up, in this study, we have shown that semiotic silence on social media is not merely the absence of political participation, but an active strategy of politically engaged MDWs who are navigating overlapping and reconfigured offline and online contexts. Our analysis posits that the (often reconfigured) chronotope of Facebook, the chronotope of red-tagging, the chronotope of MDWs' work life, and the chronotope of organizing Filipino migrants emerge as dominant forces in shaping online behaviors and media ideologies of members in grassroots political organizations. We have shown how these chronotopes, tied to material and ideological constraints, shape members' semiotic silence online, as well as the responses of leaders of these organizations. This supports the argument that it is the "socially positioned individual, rather than technology, that shapes interactions" (Lyons & Tagg 2019:662). At the same time, context collapse does present a challenge, especially under state repression, when it is difficult for these workers to control who their audience is and how their message is interpreted and repurposed (Marwick & boyd 2010). This further shapes their media ideologies, leading them to view social media as an unsafe place to engage politically. Yet, we see that these workers are not merely victims of collapse; they strategically navigate the online-offline nexus, selectively displaying their member identity in ways that mediate perceived risk while sustaining engagement. In this sense, social media does not just collapse context; it complicates it,

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requiring individuals to make continuous, strategic choices about their engagement. This aligns with the work of other sociolinguistic scholars who challenge deterministic views of context collapse and emphasize that individuals actively shape their online interactions rather than being passively constrained by technology (e.g. Androutsopoulos 2014; Szabla & Blommaert 2020).

Further, we see that our participants' engagement is not solely dictated by external constraints. Within their organizational context, they negotiate their own meanings of participation and belonging. Members and leaders develop their own understandings of what it means to be a 'good member', grounded in their shared experiences and chronotopic understandings. Within this context, semiotic silence is not simply read as avoidance—it is a recognized practice that allows members in the organizations to navigate risk while maintaining solidarity, and can be read and accepted by leaders in various ways. The acceptance of online semiotic silence also points to how leaders see their members not only as people who 'do not want to engage more online' but rather as people who 'cannot engage more online'. In this way, this study also contributes to scholarship on political engagement online that pays attention to both 'subjective assessment' of social activism (Honari 2018), and also to INTERSUBJECTIVE assessment within grassroots organizations.

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Notes

1. Source: https://data.gov.hk/en-data/dataset/hk-immd-set4-statistics-fdh, accessed July 14, 2022.
2. Source: https://www.meltwater.com/en/blog/social-media-statistics-philippines, accessed March 6, 2023.
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