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The Filipino comfort women on YouTube: Emotions, advocacy, and war memories in a transnational digital space

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the representation and contestation of Filipino comfort women's memories on YouTube and assess the platform's role in public discourse and transnational activism. Our content analysis of visual and narrative elements, alongside user commentary on selected videos, reveals that YouTube acts as a crucial transnational medium, linking advocacy networks and contextualizing historical narratives. However, the videos often sensationalize the victims' experiences, undermining the seriousness of sexual violence, which could potentially weaken advocacy efforts. Moreover, user commentary on the videos can promote counter-narratives, rumors, and hostile comments. Despite these challenges, we underscore YouTube's significance in fostering public discourse on war memories and justice in the Philippines in light of the government's efforts to suppress the history of Filipino comfort women. The platform encourages the sharing of corroborative postmemory, enhancing war memorialization and audience engagement and supporting the women's claims of abuse. Ultimately, YouTube's role as an open forum for discussion is vital in fostering dialogues for peace and justice and countering propaganda and hate.

1. Introduction

On 8 March 2023, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) ruled that the Philippines violated the rights of Filipino comfort women, victims of sexual slavery during the Asia-Pacific War, since the government failed to provide reparation, social support, and recognition proportional to the harm they suffered. The ruling was issued in response to a complaint filed by the Malaya Lolas (Free Grandmothers), an organization supporting surviving sexual slavery victims. CEDAW urged the Philippines to "provide full and effective redress and reparation" (CEDAW, 2023) to comfort women, most of whom have already passed away.

This ruling serves as vindication for the lolas (grandmothers) who have long campaigned for state recognition of their decades-long suffering, although the comfort women issue only emerged in the Philippines in the 1990s as part of a broader international recognition of the victims' narratives. Faced with vigorous demands for symbolic and material reparations, the Philippine government worked alongside Japan to tackle the issue through the Asian Women's Fund (AWF). This fund, established by the Japanese government, was designed to provide reparations to victims

through private donations by Japanese citizens. Nevertheless, numerous victims across the globe refused compensation from the AWF, as it purportedly allowed the Japanese government to continue denying its legal obligations to comfort women. Subsequently, the victims failed to persuade the Philippine government to champion their cause. In 2017, the Tulay Foundation, a Filipino-Chinese civic organization, with support from the National Historical Commission of the Philippines (NHCP), inaugurated a statue in Manila dedicated to the memory of the Filipino Comfort Woman. The installation quickly raised concerns at the Japanese Embassy in Manila, prompting the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs to seek an explanation for the statue's installation. Citing a drainage improvement project in the vicinity, the government removed the monument four months after its unveiling, drawing criticism from activists and several lawmakers (Cabico, 2018). Then-President Duterte emphasized that the statue could be relocated, as it did not align with his government's policy to "antagonize other nations" (Rappler, 2018a). This response indicated that the issue had broached a sensitive area in the country's international relations.

While there has been an apparent effort from the Philippine government to skirt the issue of Filipino comfort women and suppress its memorialization, their story remains alive in many circles, mainly through the campaigns of activist groups such as the Malaya Lolas and *LILA-Pilipina* (*Liga ng mga Lolang Pilipina* or League of Filipina Grandmothers). The victims' stories circulate in popular and social media through movies and documentaries. More recently, the controversies surrounding the removal of the Filipino comfort women statue in 2018 and the CEDAW ruling in 2023 have also inspired the circulation of content in digital social media. However, little is known about the role of social media content focused on Filipino comfort women and how it enables memorialization in a digital and transnational context.

In this paper, we investigate the circulation, representation, and contestations surrounding the memory of Filipino comfort women on YouTube, the world's largest video-hosting platform. Analyzing YouTube content relating to comfort women's memory enables us to understand how memories of war and conflict are remembered by a transnational audience that belongs to the generation of the postmemory (Hirsch, 2008), who are only able to actively "remember" traumatic events as they are mediated through stories told today. While we hope to understand how memory is mediated in a digital space, we are also interested in how digital media content consumers and users interact with contentious war memories. As the comfort women issue remains contentious internationally, we seek to unravel the nuances of public discourse on the issue in the Philippines, how it varies in different international contexts, and whether transnational digital platforms like YouTube are effective in fostering engagement and understanding of this contentious historical issue and the injustices associated with it.

2. Situating Lolas within the transnational comfort women movement

The term "comfort women" is a euphemism originating from the Japanese *jugun ianfu*, which refers to women forced to become sexual slaves during the Asia-Pacific War from 1932 to 1945 (Lynch, 2009). They were girls who were abducted or forcibly mobilized to provide sexual services to the soldiers and officers of the Japanese Imperial Army during the war. Estimated numbers of these women range from 45,000 to 200,000, and they were detained in "comfort stations" (*ianjo* in Japanese) or Japanese military brothels where they were raped and abused physically and sexually every day (Min, 2022). The comfort station system of the Japanese Imperial Army is well-established

in the literature (Hayashi, 2008). The Japanese Imperial Army has rationalized the system as a way to prevent the rape of locals and the spread of venereal disease and provide “comfort” to the soldiers through sexual pleasure (Hayashi, 1999). Unfortunately, wartime rape continued while comfort stations only served as vectors for the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases (Argibay, 2003). The majority of the women subjected to abuse in the comfort stations were believed to have died due to disease, malnutrition, killed by bombings or by Japanese soldiers, or committed suicide (Min, 2021). The survivors resumed their lives faced with various difficulties ranging from health issues (infertility, venereal diseases) to social challenges at a time when womanhood was measured based on their purity and capacity to marry and bear children. They were forced to keep silent out of fear that their abuse made them undesirable (Soh, 1996), and it would take years before some survivors found the courage to speak of their experiences.

While the Japanese general public was aware of the existence of comfort women in the 1970s (Hayashi, 1999), it was through the comfort women’s movement in the 1990s that the issue occupied the international spotlight. From academic discussions in South Korea and diplomatic disputes between South Korea and Japan, the comfort woman issue took a turn when the first victim came out. The 68-year-old survivor Kim Hak-Sun decided to speak to the press, which inspired others to come forward with their testimonies.

The memorialization of the war in the Philippines has greatly focused on the valorization of men who gave their lives to fighting, as soldiers who died in the Fall of Bataan and Corregidor, as prisoners of war who walked the Death March, and as guerrilla freedom fighters who bravely fought the Japanese. The burgeoning civic movement in South Korea stimulated investigations of the Japanese Imperial Army’s comfort stations in other countries, and soon, a medical document surfaced dated 19 March 1942 that included a sketch of the location of a comfort station in Iloilo (Mendoza, 2003). The Philippine government rushed to ascertain the document’s veracity, and in June 1992, it declared that there was no evidence of comfort stations in the Philippines (Hicks, 1995). Task Force on Filipino Comfort Women (TFFCW), a feminist organization, decided to look more closely and called for comfort women survivors to come forward. Later, in 1992, a survivor contacted them: Maria Rosa Henson. The Japanese government’s official inquiry, released on 6 July 1992, admitted the conscription of comfort women coming from Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, China, and Japan itself, negating the Philippine government’s report that there were no comfort stations in the country (Thomas, 2008). In 1993, Japan released another statement. The Kono statement, issued by then Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono, acknowledged the Japanese involvement in the comfort stations and expressed apologies and remorse to the victims.

While Japan has issued acknowledgments and apologies for its wartime actions, including the treatment of comfort women, critics contend that there have been contrary statements, inconsistent actions, and political efforts to revise or challenge these admissions, undermining the spirit of the Kono Statement. Japan’s AWF program, intended to compensate the victims through donations from private Japanese citizens, faced criticism. Many victims and advocacy groups argued that the AWF’s reliance on private donations failed to constitute official state reparations and thus lacked governmental accountability (Soh, 2000). The reception of the AWF varied internationally, influenced by different governmental stances. In the Philippines and the Netherlands, where governments permitted victims to decide independently, the AWF money was accepted. On the other hand, the governments of South Korea, Taiwan, and Indonesia prohibited such autonomous decisions by their victims. Instead, alternative compensation methods were developed: in Taiwan,

funds were raised by the government and activist groups, while in South Korea, it was primarily the movement that raised equivalent funds to what the AWF intended to distribute. These divergent responses to the AWF reflect the varied perceptions of its adequacy and legitimacy as compensation among the affected countries. While some viewed it as a positive step, albeit insufficient, others saw it as a deviation from formal governmental responsibility and an inadequate response to the grave injustices suffered by the comfort women.

Henson's surfacing in 1992 was a watershed moment in the Philippine comfort women redress movement. It was through Henson that the practice of referring to Filipino comfort station survivors as grandmother or "Lola" started, as she was introduced to the public as "Lola Rosa" (Mendoza, 2003). More comfort women followed her lead. TFFCW disbanded in 1994 to create LILA-Pilipina, an organization where comfort women survivors were at the forefront of advocacy and decision-making. An ideological split in the movement broke up LILA-Pilipina and the Malaya Lolas in 1996. This split resulted from the disagreement in approaching Japan's AWF, although many of the lolas who received AWF payments, including Lola Rosa, still waited for an official state apology (Mendoza, 2003). Nonetheless, the splintering of the Philippine movement was not isolated, as the AWF debacle was seen as "a blow to the international coalition" (Kern and Nam, 2009: 243) that resulted in similar fragmentation and disagreements in many international civic groups.

The continuing movement for Japan to recognize its liability for the comfort women's suffering pushed through in the 2000s. In the 2010s, the movement took a monumental turn as statues commemorating the women were erected, first in South Korea and later elsewhere, most notably in the United States. From courts, the movement shifted to heritagization, as campaigners set their eyes toward ensuring that the memory of comfort women is immortalized in physical structures. The Filipina Comfort Women statue, built in 2017 and removed in 2018, was part of this trend. Upon its overnight removal, a social campaign for its restoration was organized under the hashtag #Flowers4Lolas (Rappler, 2018b). Thus, the saga of the comfort women endures—not only as a battle fought in courts but also through memory and memorialization.

3. YouTube as a digital and transnational space for collective remembrance

We are interested in exploring how digital platforms have been utilized to circulate comfort women's memories. We view digital spaces as potential arenas for expanding the memory activism central to the transnational comfort women advocacy movement. At the heart of this movement lie the memories of comfort women, which constitute traumatic memories of conflict fraught with competing narratives and representations. Multiple actors, including but not limited to memory activists, work to transform and elaborate meanings emanating from the past symbolically (Jelin, 2003). Thus, digital spaces offer platforms for alternative forms of commemoration, especially in contexts of asymmetric power relations where the state hesitates to memorialize for fear that it might be interpreted as official and state-sanctioned.

Digital platforms offer a chance to promote awareness and initiate political transformations independently from government channels (Gutman, 2017). Within these digital realms, a diverse range of participants remembers across scales and nationalities, transcending state and ethnic confines (Fridman and Ristić, 2020). However, as digital technologies liberated memory from its traditional bounds in place and space (Hoskins, 2011b), it has also fundamentally changed how we

remember and relate to the past. Hoskins (2011a, 2011b) referred to this change as the connective turn, “an ontological shift in what memory is and what it does” (Hoskins and Halstead, 2021: 675) as it shaped the recalibration of memory as people “connect with, inhabit and constitute increasingly both dense and diffused social networks” (Hoskins, 2011b: 271). These connective memories, “moments of connection in ever-changing networks situated locally in everyday life” (De Smale, 2020: 192), can take different forms.

Our focus in this paper is to analyze the representation of Filipino comfort women and their cause, along with the resulting user interaction emanating from these representations on YouTube. Multiple studies have examined communicative practices relating to contested heritage on social media sites, with YouTube emerging as the most frequently studied platform while the World Wars were the most frequent topic of study (Kelpšienė et al., 2023). However, these studies primarily concentrated on the European side of the war. As it stands, the Filipino comfort woman issue has been greatly eclipsed by the prominence of the Japanese and Korean actors in the controversy (Ushiyama, 2021), and more broadly, Southeast Asian war memories have been largely neglected in Asia-Pacific War commemoration literature (Schumacher, 2015). Thus, our study fills a crucial geographic gap that most scholars in various fields have overlooked.

Our study sample consists of twenty YouTube videos addressing the topic of comfort women in the Philippines. These videos were selected after searching for, filtering, and coding the verbal and non-verbal qualities of each piece of audiovisual material. On 23 May 2023, we used the YouTube search engine to query “Comfort Women in the Philippines,” applying a filter to “sort by view count.” The search yielded 165 videos from various countries. Since our primary interest was in videos directly discussing the Philippines, we manually filtered the results to identify the twenty most viewed videos dedicated to Filipino comfort women, resulting in a view count ranging from 6.9 thousand to 3.8 million views. Similar to previous studies on YouTube and conflict memories (Benzaquen, 2014; Knudsen and Stage, 2013; De Smale, 2020), we conducted an audiovisual content analysis to assess the extent of representation, examining how the events are portrayed in the videos. Subsequently, we utilized discourse analysis to evaluate the levels of interaction, scrutinizing how users engage with these narratives within the online space. This dual analysis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the content and viewer engagement regarding the memory of comfort women in the Philippines as presented on YouTube.

To understand the representation’s production process, we classified videos based on Makhortykh’s (2017) four audiovisual genres: tributes, documentaries, news, and interviews. As an online networking site, YouTube serves as a space of remembrance, increasing interaction among multi-ethnic users in these democratic spaces of commemoration (Gibson and Jones, 2012; Makhortykh, 2017; De Smale, 2020). Therefore, we aimed to identify patterns and trends in video content production, the expression of emotions, and their associated transnational characteristics. This approach makes visible the interactions between institutions and individuals (Benzaquen, 2014), which are integral to the digital representation of the advocacy movement.

Next, we concentrated on the interactions elicited by these videos. Guided by Makhortykh’s (2017) methodology, our attention turned to examining the verbal components of user interaction, focusing on the video’s comments section. Comments on digital platforms can illuminate the intersection between historical narratives and collective consciousness that transcends national boundaries (Drinot, 2011). We considered non-verbal elements such as likes less pertinent to our

study. It is important to note that since 2021, YouTube has disabled the public visibility of dislike counts, thus diminishing the value of quantifying video likes for insights. Therefore, we gave precedence to analyzing user engagement through the volume of replies and likes garnered by comments, viewing these metrics as more indicative of interactive discourse.

We employed MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software, 2021), a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, to import comments from the selected YouTube videos. Our initial dataset consisted of 16,819 comments. We extracted only the top-level comments, excluding replies, which resulted in a corpus of 6,970 comments. Subsequently, we eliminated comments that did not elicit replies, reducing our sample to 1,323 comments. We further reduced this subset by excluding comments irrelevant to the research theme, unintelligible, duplicated, or not in English or Filipino. This process yielded a final dataset of 890 comments, which formed the basis of our inductive coding and thematic categorization. To facilitate an efficient analysis, the comments within this dataset were autocoded based on the number of replies they garnered, thus enabling us to reference related discussions whenever necessary.

Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter under investigation, we adhered to rigorous ethical standards in data handling. Following Reilly's (2014) recommendations for maximum discretion in sensitive research contexts, we assigned a unique retrieval code to each comment to anonymize user identities. The comments quoted in this study were also paraphrased to preclude any possibility of tracing back to the source. The results derived from this process are explained in the succeeding sections.

4. Representing comfort women's memories on YouTube

Using content analysis, we examined the descriptions of the twenty most-viewed YouTube videos related to Filipino comfort women. We identified four primary genres addressing the issue: documentaries, tributes, interviews, and news.

The four documentaries in our sample accumulated the highest views, totaling 2.4 million. Produced mainly by traditional media, their popularity can be attributed to high-quality production, thorough research, superior sound and video quality, and compelling narratives. Unlike tributes, these documentaries distinguished themselves by incorporating extensive research materials, including historical footage, documents, expert commentaries, and firsthand accounts from Filipino comfort women. Experts provided context for the women's testimonies, and significant architectural sites that served as torture or comfort stations, such as Bahay na Pula (Red House) in Pampanga, Lizares Mansion in Iloilo, and Fort Santiago in Manila, were also prominently featured. The phrase "If these walls could talk..." is frequently used in the videos, highlighting the role of these spaces in visualizing war memories.

The documentaries also stood out in video production and narrative techniques. Close-up shots highlighted the comfort women's emotions, while emotional background music and relevant videos enhanced the authenticity of the narratives. Dramatic reenactments, often depicting actors as young comfort women (see Figure 1), utilized specific camera angles and sound effects to portray their traumatic experiences during the war vividly. These production choices effectively brought comfort women's stories to life, contributing to the documentaries' impact and viewer engagement.



Figure 1. A screen capture of the reenactment from the documentary “iJuander” by GMA Public Affairs. https://youtu.be/Nb0hq6Et_Ak

Narrative quality was a key factor in the impact of these audiovisual materials. For example, the video “Ang Lihim ni Lola” (Grandmother’s Secret) added background stories about Filipino comfort women to engage viewers more deeply. This documentary garnered the highest views among our analyzed videos, reaching 1.8 million. Another significant work, the Arirang Special Edition documentary, effectively linked the struggles of Korean *halmonis* (Grandmothers in Korean) and Filipino lolas in their collective quest for recognition. Both documentaries emphasized the dwindling number of surviving comfort women and their deteriorating health, prompting viewers to reflect on the urgency of achieving their justice agendas.

The video “Comfort Women-Philippines,” though classified as a documentary, shares characteristics with tribute videos. Created by local college students in the Philippines, it exhibits amateur traits typical of tribute clips: lack of citations for historical materials, heavy reliance on historical context, and inconsistencies in visual production quality. The tribute videos we analyzed were often created by students as part of schoolwork or by YouTube bloggers and enthusiasts; thus, they naturally display these informal qualities. However, they play a crucial role in understanding representation and commemoration on YouTube (Makhortykh, 2017). The four tribute videos in our sample garnered 567,000 views and 358 comments. Among these, three were produced locally and one internationally, averaging about 10:30 minutes in length. Despite their quality, these videos share similar structural and content features, underscoring their significance in the digital landscape of memory and commemoration.

The tribute videos in our study exhibit a consistent structure characterized by engaging introductions, a strong emphasis on historical context, and frequent references to notable figures. For example, the short film “Nana Rosa | A Short Film (based from [sic] true story)” starts with a content sensitivity disclaimer, followed by a dramatic poem reading and a rape scene dramatization. Another video, “Filipino Comfort Women || What happened to them during World War 2,”

introduces its subject with rape scenarios and references to well-known contemporary rape cases in the Philippines, posing the provocative question, “What if you were gang-raped by the Japanese Imperial Army during the 2nd World War?” This approach is marked by a disconcerting blend of seriousness and insensitivity, as seen in the incorporation of humorous memes and sound effects juxtaposed with a reenactment of sexual harassment and a narration style that injects humor into discussions of sexual abuse at garrisons (see Figure 2). We interpret this mixing of tones as an attempt to balance the gravity of the subject with elements designed to maintain viewer engagement and interest. Such a strategy reflects the attempt to navigate the complexities of presenting sensitive historical content in a manner that still resonates with contemporary audiences on digital platforms.



Figure 2. Comfort women were likened to fresh vegetables. A screen capture from the video “FILIPINO COMFORT WOMEN || WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM DURING WORLD WAR 2” by the channel *Filipinos Ask*. https://youtu.be/amYW_ktKR54

Tribute videos often utilized unattributed materials, frequently sourced from other YouTube content, predominantly documentaries. These materials, used to provide historical context, sometimes mismatched the on-screen narrative; for example, footage of Korean comfort women was used while discussing Filipino victims, likely due to limited visual resources specific to the Philippines.

These videos commonly featured recurring elements, such as excerpts from Maria Rosa Henson’s autobiography *Comfort Woman: Slave of Destiny* (Henson and Coronel, 1996), to underscore the comfort women’s struggle. A notable quote from Henson – “Many have asked me whether I am still angry with the Japanese. If Jesus Christ could forgive those who crucified Him, I thought I could also find it in my heart to forgive those who had abused me” – often concluded these videos, emphasizing the need for support and recognition. The overarching message in these tribute videos is a call for the Philippine government to preserve the memory of these comfort women as they pass away.

The news clips in our study, the shortest format analyzed, also garnered the lowest views among the four categories. Our sample included seven news pieces: three from international outlets like Arirang News, Al Jazeera, and Associated Press (AP), and four from Filipino broadcasters, with three aired on television and one online. These reports spanned a broad time range, with the newest video published in early 2023 and the oldest dating back seven years. The AP news video from 2018

even included archival footage from 1997. Despite the temporal gap, recurring narratives emerged, from Filipino comfort women demanding justice to the Philippine government's inconsistent stances.

The news pieces showcased calls for action through various means. Interviews with Filipino comfort women recounted their traumatic experiences, especially at Bahay na Pula. The A video included a reenactment that depicted the torture of comfort women, with lolas acting out past abuses amid tears and prayers. The 1997 protests were also featured, displaying placards with messages urging action from then-Philippine President Ramos and the Japanese government. These videos highlight the urgency of the advocacy by emphasizing the need for timely resolution as the comfort women age and their health deteriorates.

A significant focus of the news clips is on various groups and politicians' efforts to advocate for Filipino comfort women's rights, often through legislative means and public advocacy. These efforts are often juxtaposed with the Philippine government's uncertain stance. Local and international media covered the controversy surrounding the Filipino comfort women statue in Manila. Despite initial support from the NHCP, the monument faced strong objections from the Japanese government, leading to its eventual removal by the Manila city administration. This incident sparked emotional reactions from the Filipino public, with many expressing frustration and disappointment. The removal was widely interpreted as a reflection of the Philippine government's prioritization of maintaining favorable diplomatic relations with Japan over addressing the historical grievances of comfort women. This tension between domestic and international relations and pursuing historical justice is a recurring theme in these news reports.

The three interview videos in our sample garnered 1.485 million views, the second-highest category after documentaries. Uploaded by international channels, including an independent news group and personal vlogging accounts, these videos varied in length, with the shortest at 14:11 and the longest at 23:18. They predominantly featured Filipino comfort women sharing their experiences, expressing past and present emotions, calling for public support, and exploring the younger generation's perspectives on these issues. These interviews featured not only sexual violence but also other wartime atrocities committed by the Japanese, such as murder, imprisonment, and torture. Many accounts focused on the experiences at Bahay na Pula, recalling the brutality of the Japanese and the helplessness felt by the women.

The videos conveyed the comfort women's emotional journey, from the trauma endured during the war to feelings of shame and abandonment post-release. For example, one interviewee hid her past from her family for fear of rejection. These narratives also highlighted the perceived neglect by the Philippine government and the broader international community. The videos emphasized calls for government support, emphasizing that the surviving Filipino victims seek recognition and liberation rather than solely financial compensation, frequently in juxtaposition with the more favorable standing of Korean comfort women.

One clip from the channel "EL's Planet" featured interviews with Filipino college students about their views on the comfort women issue, illustrating the transgenerational nature of the topic. The students discussed why Filipinos, unlike Koreans, tend not to harbor resentment toward the Japanese, citing cultural and economic influences from Japan. However, they acknowledged the need for greater awareness of the comfort women's experiences, emphasizing ongoing issues like

sexual discrimination. This contrast in perspectives highlights the evolving nature of historical memory and its relevance across generations.

5. Themes of comments and interactions relating to comfort women issues

YouTube's comments feature invites reaction and participation from the viewers. More often than not, arguments and discussions between users occur due to the platform's openness to the public. These comments range from personal sharing of reflections and opinions to more spirited and often polarizing discussions. Nonetheless, these comments reflect public discourses relevant to the comfort women issue at both a national (Philippines) and transnational level. YouTube's communicative space allows the coming together of voices from different perspectives. Exploring these perspectives illuminates the ever-changing perception of comfort women as an issue that concerns justice, remembrance, and international cooperation. Our content analysis revealed five major themes: strong emotional responses, sharing of personal memories, calls to move on and forget, criticism and defense of Japan, and international solidarity. We expound on these major themes in this section.

Strong emotional responses. Some of the most liked comments across the selection of videos on comfort women tend to be expressions of sadness for the victims and their suffering, which relates to how most victims tell detailed stories of their abuse in the videos. This theme also has the most comments and interaction. For instance, Commenter L77 reflects on the victims' silence: "They feared judgment from their fellow Filipinos... these women, like any rape victim, should never be blamed for what they went through." Commenter L37 observes the lasting impact of trauma, noting: "Even at her current age, she continues to suffer greatly from the traumatic experience." Additionally, Commenter L01 shares a profound emotional response to a victim's statement in a video: "I was ashamed that the Japanese raped me." These comments exemplify a deep sense of empathy and engagement from viewers responding to the poignant stories shared in these videos.

The emotional responses elicited by the testimonies of comfort women reflect the inherent power of violent narratives to provoke feelings like anger and despair. Commenters express particular distress over the fact that many comfort women remained silent due to shame, with numerous remarks emphasizing that the shame rightfully belongs to the perpetrators, not the victims. This collective expression of despair and outrage echoes the sentiments that fueled the comfort women advocacy movement. As Stetz (2010) notes, the movement's triumph lies in the sphere of representation – the gathering, interpreting, and disseminating of personal narratives, which has been pivotal in sparking activism and motivating action. Numerous comments advocated remembering the comfort women's stories, especially as many have passed away. For example, Commenter L137 acknowledges the resilience of these women and states, "As a member of Generation Z... it is our responsibility to preserve and honor these stories." Similarly, Commenter L172 views these narratives as integral to the legacy of the generation that endured the war, saying, "We owe them a debt for what we have today. I'll do my best to honor their experiences and prevent such horrors from happening again. We will always remember you!" These remarks underscore a perceived moral obligation to remember the past, seen as a civic duty to the collective. Commenters also highlight the tragedy of many comfort women passing away without receiving due recognition and justice, reinforcing the imperative of remembrance.

The victims' testimonies in these videos also incite some viewers to express extreme and harsh opinions about the Japanese. These range from labeling them as "demons" to suggesting that the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were "deserved" and even wishing for further calamities like tsunamis and earthquakes to befall them. Additionally, there are instances of racist comments aimed not only at Japanese but also at other nationalities, including Koreans and Filipinos. While these types of comments are less frequent compared to other forms of opinion expression, they highlight a concerning aspect of YouTube's comment sections on videos covering contentious subjects. Such spaces can become hotbeds for extreme viewpoints and hate speech that reinforce differences and stereotypes (Bräuchler, 2023), underscoring the need for careful moderation and awareness of the potential for digital platforms to amplify divisive and harmful rhetoric.

Sharing of postmemory. Viewing the comfort women videos sparked moments of personal connection among users, leading them to recount war victimization stories passed down from their grandparents and parents. The emotions conveyed in the videos tend to evoke empathy, which, in turn, triggers postmemory (De Smale, 2020). This response is particularly poignant given that the generation that directly experienced the war has largely passed away. The comments reveal how the post-war generation's memories (Hirsch, 2008) are induced and articulated, showcasing intergenerational perspectives on war and its ensuing suffering.

Our analysis of these comments often shared to support the comfort women's cause, suggests that they add credibility and authority to the victims' testimonies. For instance, Commenter P12 recounts how their mother and her sisters had to disguise themselves to avoid the Japanese soldiers: "They had their heads shaved and their faces stained with dirt so they wouldn't look desirable." Similarly, Commenter L215 shares how the men in their family became guerrilla fighters, while the women "dressed as men and appeared unattractive to avoid attention... [they] had to move frequently, sometimes weekly."

These comments show a distinct gender narrative: stories about mothers and grandmothers often relate directly to experiences of rape and sexual abuse, while those about fathers and grandfathers typically concern their roles as combatants, prisoners of war, or guerrilla fighters. This distinction underscores the entrenched gender stereotypes in Filipino society today, which were also pronounced during wartime (Candelaria, 2021). However, it must be noted that most familial responses refer to the experiences of mothers and grandmothers during the war, which could indicate that the YouTube videos evoke the same relationships, i.e., women as mothers and grandmothers. In turn, the focus on women could also lead to the emphasis on the role of men as war combatants. This observation may reflect the predominant focus of war memorialization in the Philippines on the valor and contributions of soldiers (Candelaria, 2023) and guerrilla fighters, who are predominantly male. Given the largely patriarchal nature of Philippine society, there is a tendency to frame women's narratives in war primarily through the lens of victimization, which contrasts with the glorification of the masculine ideal embodied by the male hero (Korać, 2022) in war commemorations. Such a perspective underscores the gendered dynamics of historical memory and recognition, where women's roles and experiences in wartime, beyond victimhood, are often overlooked or underemphasized in the collective narrative. This bias shapes public memory and influences how historical events are commemorated and understood in contemporary society, as shown in these user comments about postmemory.

Some of the comments that encapsulate postmemory also extend beyond the narrative of inherited trauma to encompass lessons learned from history and the importance of preventing its repetition. These discussions reveal that postmemory involves more than just carrying the weight of past traumas. For instance, Commenter S29 makes a poignant connection between their family's history and the experiences of the comfort women, vowing never to forget: "It is only just that the next generation learns about the suffering that you went through." Similarly, Commenter U49 brings up the Bataan Death March, a wartime ordeal endured by a family member. They reflect on their family's inability to comprehend the resulting trauma ("his family didn't understand that he had PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] because of it, leading to resentment"), yet the commenter holds no animosity at present, acknowledging that "the Japanese have learned from their mistakes. Let's learn from history to avoid repeating it. There's no shame in facing and gaining knowledge from the past."

These comments underscore that while familial narratives often relay traumatic experiences, they are also viewed by the postgeneration as vital reminders not to replicate past injustices. Hirsch (2012) describes this as allo-identification, the capacity to empathize with memory not personally experienced without being overwhelmed. In the context of these YouTube comments, references to postmemory seem to be an intentional effort to leverage the understanding of traumatic experiences as a means to foster discussions about remembrance and justice rather than merely dwelling on the trauma itself.

The desire to move on, forgive, and forget. The YouTube comments display a spectrum of opinions, including several that urge the victims to accept their past and move forward. Some comments are bluntly worded, such as Commenter Q03's remark: "So you want Japan to apologize to you individually? Just move on!" Others use insensitive humor in their attempt to call for victims to get on with their lives. For example, Commenter C06 contrasted Filipino women's perceptions of Japanese men during the war and today: "Now, when there are Japanese, [Filipino women] do not hide anymore; they come out." Additionally, Commenter S22 suggests that discussing these historical issues might provoke conflict: "It's not good to talk about old wars. For what? To instigate a new one? Just move on. Because the past and the present are different times."

These comments often imply that once atrocities are exposed, they are unlikely to recur. Some users, reflecting on Japan's role as a destination for migrant workers and a leading provider of official development aid, advocate for setting aside the comfort women issue, especially in discussions related to the Manila Comfort Woman Statue. Commenter C02 reasons: "It is only right that Japan expressed its disappointment [over the monument] because the Philippines has yet to forgive, despite the war happening so long ago." Commenter C21 even suggests a trade-off: "While the Japanese violated human rights, they are also the ones who helped the Philippines to develop."

Several comments across the videos discuss reasons for forgiving Japan, ranging from the Philippines' Christian values, a tendency to be kind to former colonizers, gaps in Filipino education about the war, or a general lack of historical consciousness. However, comments urging victims to forget the past or implying they have financial motives for speaking out elicited strong emotional rebuttals. Commenter D15 counters: "[T]ry watching a documentary about Filipino comfort women. I don't think you could still say 'move on' when you find out the horrors they went through." Others, like Commenter Q07, argue for the necessity of genuine reparations, astonished by the insensitivity of some Filipinos: "It's hard to believe that some suggest the victims should just move on. Denial of

the sexual abuse by Japan and individuals like Abe [former Japanese prime minister] makes it difficult for the victims to heal. Reparations and acknowledgment are necessary for their closure and justice.”

Japan’s critics and defenders. In the comments, a prominent discussion theme is the critique of Japan’s perceived failure to apologize and acknowledge the experiences of comfort women adequately. This criticism is met with counterpoints from users who highlight that Japan has issued apologies and provided reparations. For example, Commenter U38 condemns Japan’s apparent refusal to apologize as “disgraceful,” criticizing the wartime rapes as actions “with the knowledge and approval of their government during World War II... Japan should be ashamed.” In contrast, defenders like Commenter H27 argue, “[t]he Japanese already said sorry and paid millions! We cannot blame the current generation for the sins of their ancestors.”

However, the assertion of Japanese apologies and reparations, perhaps referencing the Kono Statement and the AWF, is heavily outweighed by user comments emphasizing the lack of a “sincere” or “genuine” apology for the comfort women. Many commenters perceive the reparations paid to the women as insufficient. However, such claims in the comments often lack substantive backing and appear driven more by emotion than evidence. Interestingly, there is an equally emotional sharing of personal stories about Japanese individuals offering apologies for their nation’s past actions. A notable instance is shared by Commenter R134, who describes a heartfelt apology from a Japanese friend: “...humbly bowed down to me and apologized multiple times for his country’s actions. In response, I joined him in bowing down and apologized. We acknowledged the pain that still lingers from the past. It reflected the forgiving and compassionate nature of Filipinos.” Comments eliciting empathy and acknowledging Japanese individuals’ kindness and apologetic nature receive numerous likes, indicating positive reception and sparking further anecdotes about positive interactions with Japanese citizens. This theme is complemented by observations that differentiate between Japanese citizens’ actions and their government’s policies. Commenter R135 illustrates this distinction, noting that “Japanese exchange students have been known to cry upon learning about the Philippines’ history during the Japanese occupation...” as they are not historically aware since the war “is not extensively discussed in Japan, where the focus is on their achievements.”

Japan’s critics in the YouTube video comments attribute the “lack of awareness” of the Japanese people on its government’s “censorship” regarding the comfort women issue, perhaps in reference to Japan’s effort to promote its interpretation of the war (Shibata, 2008). Conversely, defenders of Japan sometimes claim that comfort women were paid prostitutes, and their abuse allegations are fabricated. Additionally, a recurring defense in the comments is the assertion that it was Korean soldiers within the Japanese Imperial Army, not Japanese soldiers, who were predominantly responsible for atrocities against Filipinos during the war. This claim, rooted in a debunked rumor from the 1950s, is historically inaccurate, as argued by Lydia Yu-Jose (2012). Japanese soldiers significantly outnumbered Korean conscripts, who were limited to non-combatant roles.

The presence of revisionist narratives in the comments, even on videos sympathetic to comfort women, suggests the spread of alternative historical interpretations and misinformation online. This trend indicates that narratives supportive of the experiences of comfort women are not exempt from contestation that challenges or undermines conventional knowledge. Within these

dialogues, comments caution about the involvement of “right-winger revisionists,” purportedly aiming to influence public opinion. This tactic is reminiscent of what Schäfer (2022) has identified as the active use of computational propaganda on Japanese social media by certain factions to shape perceptions and narratives surrounding historical events.

International solidarity. YouTube’s global platform brings together commenters from diverse nationalities, fostering discussions on transnational issues like the ongoing advocacy of comfort women for justice. Although our analysis focused on videos about Filipino comfort women, many comments highlight the similar experiences of Korean, Chinese, Indonesian, and Dutch comfort women. This revelation often surprises other commenters unaware of the abuse’s extensive international scope. Such exchanges reflect the development of international solidarity among users from different countries, united in their support for the comfort women’s cause. This sense of solidarity is particularly evident among Filipino and Korean commenters.

Filipino commenters frequently acknowledge the use of historical photographs of Korean women in these videos, recognizing that a larger number of Korean women were subjected to this ordeal. The suffering of Korean victims is widely empathized with in the comments, while several users emphasize the importance of countries affected by this issue banding together to demand recognition and reparations from Japan. However, some comments suggest that Koreans possess more leverage in this matter. They argue that the Korean redress movement is more robust due to its larger number of victims, a longer period under Japanese colonial rule, and stronger economic and geopolitical standing compared to the Philippines.

A recurring theme among commenters is the perceived inability of the Philippine government to fully support the comfort women’s cause, attributed to the country’s economic and aid dependencies on Japan. This perspective is particularly pronounced in discussions about the 2015 agreement between Japan and South Korea on comfort women. Commenters in these discussions often point out that Koreans negotiated a more favorable deal due to their lesser dependence on Japan.

Videos on comfort women, while inspiring solidarity, also serve as a platform for analyzing the successes and failures of redress movements within the context of each country’s unique international and domestic political realities. This dynamic highlights the complex interplay between historical grievances, international diplomacy, and transnational advocacy efforts in shaping public discourse on historical injustices.

6. Conclusion

This study looked into the representation of Filipino comfort women in YouTube videos and user interaction in their comment sections. Through analysis of visual and narrative depictions and comments, we find that victim testimonies remain potent in evoking emotional responses from users. The call-to-action present in all videos ensures that the connection between the abuse and the demand for redress is maintained and that the emotional response generated could perhaps translate to activism. Unfortunately, many videos capitalized on the shock value of the comfort women’s rape and abuse to attract viewership. Some videos failed to address the sensitive topics they discussed, which could have undermined the message of continuing injustice.

While the transnational redress movement has focused on Japan as the unrepentant perpetrator of abuse, our selected videos were more focused on the role of the Philippine government as a hindrance to achieving justice. The state's lack of recognition and support has been highlighted more than Japan's alleged effort to deny the comfort women's claims. While this dynamic makes it difficult to situate the Filipino movement into the broader redress movement, we find that the visual and narrative choices made when discussing the historical context of the comfort station system and the extent to which women of different nationalities are more than sufficient to see the advocacy's transnational network.

Our analysis also enabled a more definite characterization of the comfort women redress movement in the Philippines and how it differs from its international counterparts. A notable absence of national-level politicization characterizes the movement in the Philippines. Consequently, memory activism within the country predominantly revolves around establishing national and local frameworks for memorializing comfort women and advocating for governmental acknowledgment and support for the lolas' cause.

Despite the Philippine government's reluctance to endorse the comfort women's redress movement and its efforts to curb memorialization, our research indicates that digital platforms, particularly YouTube, play a pivotal role in nurturing discourse on justice and war memories. YouTube transcends the limitations of traditional and physical commemorative spaces, offering a dynamic forum for preserving contentious war memories (Gibson and Jones, 2012; Makhortykh, 2017; De Smale, 2020). The assemblage of testimonies, news, archival footage and photographs, and even audience perceptions, enable memory discourses to surface. Our analysis of user interaction through the videos' comment sections supports this claim. We find that meaning-making from extant war memories is actively promoted as the comfort women videos motivated users to share their relevant postmemory. The expression of these familial and vernacular responses indicates that the videos effectively connect with their audiences. War postmemory evoked from audiences bolster the claims of abuse experienced by the comfort women in their testimonies. While the Filipino comfort women movement may not be as recognized and as powerful as its Korean or Chinese counterparts, transnational digital platforms such as YouTube enable memory activism to persist.

However, we also see the potential disadvantages of YouTube's publicness. As with any platform that promotes open discussions, claims that directly counter comfort women narratives co-exist with statements of support for the movement. Fake rumors based on fabricated claims decades ago could also be reactivated on the platform. More importantly, hostile and aggressive speech that promotes racism and hate is also expressed on the platforms. YouTube and other social media platforms exert effort in moderating public forums and have improved their capabilities through the years. Nonetheless, we argue that the benefits of open discussion spaces that enable the appreciation and remembrance of otherwise suppressed or marginalized war memories outweigh the disadvantages, as dialogue that promotes peace and justice countervails propaganda and hate.

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