

Voices of the Filipino Diaspora: Communication and Cultural Identity among Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in Stockholm, Sweden

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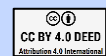
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ABSTRACT

Communication plays a crucial role in sustaining relationships and preserving traditions, particularly for Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), who face both cultural displacement and the need for adaptation. In this sense, digital communication has become a vital tool that bridges the distance between their homeland and the host country. However, while existing studies often emphasize the economic contributions and emotional challenges of OFWs, less attention has been given to how communication sustains cultural identity in diaspora contexts such as Sweden. The main objective of this study is to explore how OFWs in Stockholm use communication, particularly digital media, to preserve their Filipino identity while navigating Swedish society. Using a case study research design, four OFWs were recruited through snowball sampling. The participants are Filipino citizens who have an adequate length of stay in Stockholm and consistently use digital tools to communicate with their families in the Philippines. The gathered data were analyzed thematically using ChatGPT, while researchers ensured proper usage throughout the process via email-based interviews. Findings revealed that OFWs maintain their identity through food, language use, cultural celebrations, and community participation, while digital platforms are essential for family connection and emotional expression. Despite these strategies, participants reported challenges, including language barriers, discrimination, and isolation, which necessitated adjustments in communication styles to accommodate intercultural interactions. These insights underscore the dual role of communication as both a coping mechanism and a cultural anchor, underscoring the need for culturally responsive policies and inclusive spaces that foster diaspora resilience and cross-cultural understanding within the context of Swedish society.

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1. Introduction

What happens to a culture when it is carried across oceans, spoken over video calls, and lived in a land that doesn't understand it? In an era where migration is constant and identity is complex, understanding how cultural roots survive and evolve in the diaspora has never been more critical. Global migration refers to the long-term movement of individuals across international borders, often driven by demographic

shifts, income disparities, educational inequalities, and geopolitical factors. It includes both emigration from sending countries and immigration into receiving countries. As stated by Dao et al. (2021), "global migration stocks would have been constant if the population size of developing countries had remained unchanged," underscoring the role of socio-demographic change in shaping migration trends. Yet, there remains limited research on how Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) actively use communication to maintain cultural identity in diaspora settings, particularly in Sweden, where Filipino values intersect with Western norms.

When local job opportunities are scarce and economic pressures persist, people often turn to migration as a means of survival. The Philippine Statistics Authority (2024) reported that an estimated 2.16 million Filipinos worked overseas from April to September 2023, reflecting the lack of opportunities at home and the need to provide for families. This significant number underscores the challenges Filipinos face in combating poverty, as breadwinners continue to make personal, academic, and professional sacrifices. This is also the reason why OFWs are called "Bayani," which is a Tagalog term for "Hero". According to Camendan et al. (2022), one of the main reasons why OFWs work abroad is due to career opportunities. The study's findings also revealed that homesickness due to culture shock is prevalent among OFWs. Now, what does this suggest? It underscores the aftermath of leaving one's family in order to make a living. Abad (2019) emphasized that communication is key for OFWs and their families. With the help of phones, emails, social media, chats, and instant messaging, online communication made it possible to remain connected to their loved ones.

De Jesus and Adducul (2024) observed that despite challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, discrimination, and emotional strain, many OFWs consciously use communication as a coping strategy. These practices not only sustain family relationships but also reinforce their Filipino cultural identity. For OFWs, this means that everyday communication serves as both a tool for adaptation to norms and a bridge for remaining connected to their roots, balancing the tension between belonging abroad and staying Filipino. Although existing Swedish research often examines Filipino migrants in relation to marriage, education, or broader diaspora experiences, this study focuses specifically on the cultural identity and communication practices of labor-migrant OFWs.

Further, Wheatley (2024) suggests that "media will continue to play a crucial role in the globalization of culture, potentially offering more inclusive and diverse portrayals that reflect the multifaceted nature of society." This is also one of the factors that the researchers are leaning towards in studying the representation of communication and cultural identity within the diasporic community. In addition to this, when it comes to cultural representation within other diasporas, Ojuola (2024) recommends examining Asian, Latin American, and Indigenous communities to broaden studies regarding the cultural dynamics of diaspora communities. Similarly, in a more focused context, Cesário and Campos (2025) emphasized that the voices of diasporic or migrant communities should be considered to assess the challenges within cultural activities better. Altogether, these studies became the central guide for this research in studying OFWs in Stockholm, Sweden.

This study, therefore, due to the limited empirical evidence, employed a method. Population context, examines how OFWs in Stockholm, Sweden, use communication to preserve their Filipino identity while navigating life in a Western social environment., it sought answers to the following questions: (1) how OFWs maintain and express their cultural identity, (2) the role of digital communication in connecting OFWs with their

families and communities back home, (3) the challenges that OFWs face in negotiating their cultural identity within Swedish society, (4) how OFWs adapt their communication styles to balance Filipino cultural values and Swedish social norms, and (5) how understanding OFWs' communication and cultural identity help improve support for the Filipino diaspora in Sweden.

1.1. Filipino Diaspora

The scattering or dispersion of Filipinos across borders and the globe is referred to as the "Filipino Diaspora." The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (2025) highlighted that it came from the Greek word "*dia speiro*", meaning "to sow over" or to scatter seeds. Contextualizing it to this study, diaspora refers to the movement of Filipinos from their homeland, the Philippines, to foreign countries, such as Sweden, to pursue their personal interest.

Abrera (2024) underscores that the Filipino diaspora is one of the most significant and most widespread across the world, highlighting the search for "better economic opportunities, education, and living standards ... [carrying] rich cultural heritage, familial ties, and a strong sense of identity." Thus, this being said, the Filipino diaspora has been evident, as we also have this thing called "second-generation diaspora", meaning that their parents are not from the host country, and they have been born in the country that their parents are in. Regardless, studies still show that Filipinos living abroad present both challenges and opportunities. Ultimately, this concept is vital to understanding how the Filipino diaspora, through migration and transnational experiences, influences Filipino communication, culture, and identity in the global context, particularly in Western countries such as Stockholm, Sweden.

1.2. Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW)

The Labor Law PH (2025) emphasized that OFW "refers to a person who is to be engaged, is engaged, or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which the person is not a citizen..." It pertains to the idea of Filipinos leaving their homeland to work abroad. Thus, in other terms, OFWs are Filipino citizens who are temporarily or permanently employed in a foreign country.

Accounts in the study by Loyola and De Los Santos (2021) highlight that one of the main reasons Filipinos work abroad is to improve their quality of life. This is consistent with the aforementioned study by Abrera (2024), which also highlights that one of the primary causes of diaspora is the pursuit of a "quality of life." With this in mind, an examination of OFWs' lives abroad would be beneficial in further improving the support that OFWs need.

1.3. Communication and Cultural Identity

Nordquist (2024) defines communication as the process of exchanging and sharing information between individuals, groups, and cultures to create mutual understanding. Communication is vital in linking and shaping the exchange of ideas, expressing one's emotions, and building ties and relationships. In this study, communication among OFWs in Stockholm, Sweden, is explored to generate patterns and analyze trends about sustaining the cultural identity of Filipinos when displaced in a different country. This concept is crucial for a deeper understanding of the experiences of OFWs.

The word "culture," on the other hand, can be highly similar to the word "communication." Just like communication, culture is a term that suggests social norms, patterns, and identities shared across individuals or a group of people (Biswas-Diener &

Thin, 2025). Culture can be shaped, and it can be changed; this phenomenon is called “situational identity”, which is highly evident among individuals such as OFWs, for they are placed in a situation where adaptation and versatility are required. Failure to do so often results in others feeling inferior or acting superior to them. Mastering situational identity may range from home versus work to formal versus informal situations. This is also the reason why cultural intelligence is essential. In this study, the adaptation of OFWs in Stockholm, Sweden, will also be explored to gather insights into how they interact with and integrate into the local community, or the host country.

When tackling cultural identity, the word “culture shock” can also be evident. According to Merriam-Webster (2025) dictionary, “it is the sense of confusion and uncertainty, sometimes with feelings of anxiety, that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation.” The researchers then define culture shock as the sudden exposure to a new culture, where a person usually does not know how to react due to having little to no knowledge. With this in mind, the researcher would also like to explore how OFWs share or exchange culture and how their experience shapes the way they live.

1.4. Theory of Representation (ToR)

Stuart Hall’s Theory of Representation (ToR) shows that meaning is not simply reflected in language or media but actively constructed through representation. It argues that representation is a process through which meanings are produced, circulated, and interpreted within cultural systems (Hall, 1997). In this view, communication does not merely mirror reality; it shapes how individuals perceive and understand it. Representations can both reinforce and challenge dominant ideologies, as they depend on what is shown, omitted, or emphasized (Guilsborough School Media, 2019). Hence, cultural identity becomes a fluid construct, shaped by how people express themselves and are perceived by others.

In this sense, ToR is utilized to interpret how OFWs construct and express their identities through communicative acts, such as language use, cultural sharing, and digital engagement. This theoretical lens enables researchers to analyze how the meanings of “Filipinoness” are created, contested, and maintained through communication in a diaspora environment (Sociology Learners, 2025). It also helps in examining how power, ideology, and culture intersect in shaping how OFWs perceive themselves and how others perceive them in Sweden. Thus, the researchers have integrated the ToR as a lens to understand better the representation of communication and cultural identity in diaspora settings, such as Sweden.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This research is a qualitative study (Gapur et al., 2024; Gapur & Pujiono, 2018), and the researchers have utilized the case study research design to gather an in-depth examination of communication practices and cultural identity among OFWs living in Sweden (Cherry, 2024). By closely analyzing the lived experiences, interactions, and narratives of this specific group, the research seeks to uncover patterns and meanings that reveal how the cultural identity is maintained and negotiated in a diaspora context.

While this detailed focus offers rich, contextualized insights, the findings may be considered to be subjective and not easily generalized to all OFWs globally or to other diaspora communities. Nonetheless, the case study methodology is well-suited to explore the complex and dynamic nature of cultural identity and communication within

this unique population. Hence, the researchers have opted to utilize this to ensure that focus and alignment with the study's goal are met.

2.2. Sampling Technique

The researchers have employed a technique for gathering participants known as the snowball sampling technique, as defined by Nikolopoulou (2022), which is a “non-probability sampling method where other units recruit units to form part of the sample.” This approach was employed in the study by having participants living in Sweden recommend an OFW who might be interested in participating. As a result, the participants have referred the researchers to another OFW in Sweden. However, due to the participants not meeting the set criteria, the number of participants has been limited to four (4).

The following criteria are used to identify the inclusion and exclusion of the participants: Firstly, they must be Filipinos currently working in Sweden. This ensures that participants actively experience day-to-day life and communication within the Swedish context. Secondly, they have been living in Sweden for at least a decade. This provides the study with sufficient cultural exposure to discuss identity and adaptation in communication. Lastly, they regularly use digital communication to stay connected with their family or the Filipino community. This is necessary to align with the study's goals, which focus on communication and cultural identity.

2.3. Participants

This study involved a total of four (4) OFWs based in Stockholm, Sweden who participated. In case study research, the number of participants does not need to be large, as the focus is on gaining a deep understanding rather than breadth. Therefore, having a lower number of participants is acceptable as it focuses on the quality rather than the quantity of participants engaged in the research study.

2.4. Instrument

The researchers utilized a four-item, open-ended, researcher-made questionnaire as the primary instrument for this study. This tool was developed to allow participants to express their insights in detail, ensuring that their lived experiences, thoughts, and perspectives were captured authentically and without limitation.

2.5. Data Gathering Procedure

This study employed an email-based data collection method to gather information on the communication practices and cultural identity of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) residing in Sweden. According to Saarijärvi and Bratt (2021), an email interview is a type of asynchronous data collection that enables researchers to reach participants across broad geographic areas. The technique is especially ideal for research on sensitive topics, as it provides interviewees with control over the speed and timing of their involvement. Moreover, email-based interviews produce written responses that are already transcribed, thus saving researchers time processing the data.

In this study, the researchers utilized this approach as it enables participants who reside across borders to answer the questions while still having full control over their time and situation.

2.6. Data Analysis

The researchers have utilized thematic analysis, a qualitative research method that systematically identifies and interprets recurring patterns or themes within textual data, enabling them to organize and derive meaningful insights from complex information (Perenara-Wilkinson, 2025). This method, often supported by AI but refined by human interpretation, is widely used across industries to uncover valuable trends. On the other hand, narrative analysis served as an additional tool for analysis. With the help of the ChatGPT tool as a support, and using Grammarly and Google Docs, the researchers were able to analyze the gathered data.

Note: The utilization of ChatGPT in the conduct of thematic analysis was limited to assisting in (1) data organization, (2) preliminary code generation, and (3) theme refinement. All procedures were closely guided and monitored by the researchers, who verified, corrected, and validated the generated outputs to ensure accuracy, credibility, and proper ethical use of the tool.

3. Result and discussion

3.1. Result

The findings are organized according to the major themes identified during the analysis, supported by direct excerpts from participant responses. Each theme is discussed in relation to the research questions and supported by existing literature, highlighting both the expected insights and emerging perspectives.

The “P” represents the participant number. The following tables, one (1) to four (4), respectively, answer the research questions or statement of the problem. The tables with the analysis are as follows:

Table 1. Themes on Maintaining and Expressing Filipino Cultural Identity in Sweden
Question no. 1: How do you maintain and express your Filipino cultural identity while living in Sweden?

PARTICIPANT NUMBER	RESPONSE	THEME
P1	<i>“I often cook Filipino food to share it with my colleagues and to stay rooted.”</i>	Food as Cultural Expression
P2	<i>“By speaking the language at home, having filipino foods and celebrate holdiays filipino with traditions.”</i>	Language Preservation / Food as Cultural Expression / Cultural Traditions
P3	<i>“Being part of the Filipino community in sweden. Organizing some Filipino events”</i>	Community Engagement
P4	<i>“By celebrating filipino ocassions also by speaking the filipino language to our children”</i>	Cultural Traditions / Language Preservation

Note: The data above were derived from the interview, which consisted of four (4) participants, conducted via Gmail. The participants were asked about how they maintain and express Filipino cultural identity in Stockholm, Sweden.

The table above shows that OFWs maintain their Filipino identity primarily through food, language, and traditions. Cooking and sharing Filipino dishes allows them to stay rooted in their culture while also **introducing** it to others in Sweden. At home, the use of the Filipino language, especially with their children, ensures that the cultural values are passed down to the next generation. Celebrating Filipino occasions and **participating in community events further strengthens these cultural ties by creating spaces where a** shared identity can flourish. These practices highlight that even in a foreign land, cultural identity can be preserved through both private family routines and collective community activities.

These strategies are **evident in an article published by KeKenneth and Co. (2023), where they were** flagged as a way to adapt and cope with culture shock. With this in mind, OFWs **can maintain their cultural identity by cooking traditional food, using their native** language, and through community engagement. Thus, these practices demonstrate how everyday acts, often considered routine, serve as powerful mechanisms for reinforcing a sense of “Filipinoness.”

Table 2. Themes on Using Digital Communication

Question no. 2: How do you use digital communication to stay connected with your loved ones?		
PARTICIPANT NUMBER	RESPONSE	THEME
P1	<i>“I use it to call them and to remind them how much I value them.”</i>	Expressing Care and Affection / Maintaining Connection
P2	<i>“With Messaging apps like WhatsApp, and messenger.”</i>	Maintaining Connection
P3	<i>“I am using digital communication Daily to my families and friends back in Philippines”</i>	Maintaining Connection
P4	<i>“I use Facebook and messenger to keep in touch”</i>	Maintaining Connection

Note: The data above were derived from the interview, which consisted of four (4) participants, conducted via Gmail. The participants were asked about their usage of digital communication to stay connected with their loved ones.

As reflected in Table 2, digital communication is a vital means by which OFWs remain connected with loved ones despite the physical distance. Through platforms such as Facebook, Messenger, and WhatsApp, participants can maintain close ties with family and friends in the Philippines. This was further supported by Deputado et al. (2021), who highlighted the importance of digital communication, especially during times like the COVID-19 pandemic, when global isolation, safety, and stress can play a vital role in one’s health.

Beyond the practical function of exchanging updates, these tools also carry an emotional weight, allowing OFWs to express care, affection, and reassurance. In effect, digital communication becomes a lifeline that not only strengthens family bonds but also affirms cultural belonging, proving essential to the diaspora experience.

Table 3. Themes on Challenges in Expressing Filipino Identity

Question no. 3: What challenges do you face when expressing your Filipino identity in Swedish society?

PARTICIPANT NUMBER	RESPONSE	THEME
P1	<i>“It would be through language because in Sweden, although you speak English you need to learn Swedish.”</i>	Language Barriers
P2	<i>“More like language descrimintaion not only as a filipino but a asian. Immitatuon of the language altjough, have only encountered this one time.”</i>	Discrimination
P3	<i>“I faced discrimination and having a hard time to learn their language.”</i>	Discrimination / Language Barriers
P4	<i>“Speaking the swedish language is a must it leads to isolation sometimes when you dont speak the language”</i>	Language Barriers / Social Isolation

Note: The data above were derived from the interview, which consisted of four (4) participants, conducted via Gmail. The participants were asked about the challenges that they face in expressing Filipino identity in Swedish society.

Table 3 reveals that OFWs face significant obstacles when expressing their Filipino identity in Sweden, with language barriers and discrimination emerging as the most common. The expectation to use Swedish often leaves participants struggling to communicate, which can lead to isolation. At the same time, discriminatory encounters, whether through stereotypes or mockery of accents, reinforce feelings of exclusion.

According to Meniado (2019), one effective way to cope with language barriers is exposure to the language being learned. This was part of the observations among the 15 OFWs, highlighting that a language can be learned “[if] given substantial opportunities to use it in meaningful contexts.” The language barrier is one of the substantial themes observed in the table above, as it also results in discrimination and social isolation. This remains prevalent, as Arrogante and Gaza (2025) note that language barriers and management issues often hinder effectiveness. However, if a language is learned successfully, it may result in gaining the respect of the natives, resulting in being more determined to learn the language.

These challenges indicate that cultural identity expression in the diaspora is not always freely welcomed; instead, it is shaped by both societal pressures and the attitudes of the host community.

Table 4. Themes on Adjusting Communication Style

Question no. 4: How do you adjust your communication style to balance Filipino values and Swedish social norms?

PARTICIPANT NUMBER	RESPONSE	THEME
P1	<i>"I tend to of course try and not show off too much of my roots to fit in the society I'm in."</i>	Self-Regulation
P2	<i>"Embrace Swedish directness by expressing your thoughts openly, but do so with the humility and warmth valued in Filipino culture. Show respect ... and offer feedback constructively, honest yet tactful."</i>	Conscious Adaptation
P3	<i>"As a filipino, i didnt have a problem how to adjust and adopt the swedish values "</i>	Seamless Integration
P4	<i>"Respect and humility in english language but sometimes it is hard especially for non english speakers"</i>	Value Negotiation

Note: The data above were derived from the interview, which consisted of four (4) participants, conducted via Gmail. The participants were asked about their experience in adjusting to Swedish social norms while balancing Filipino values.

The responses in Table 4 demonstrate the different ways OFWs adapt their communication to balance Filipino values with Swedish norms. Some regulate their expressions of identity to fit in, while others consciously merge Swedish directness with Filipino warmth and humility. Part of this includes "Foreign Talk", where the use of gestures and simple words is employed to facilitate easy understanding (Bautista & Tamayo, 2020). This is a conscious adaptation strategy being used to enhance comprehension. A few participants even described the adjustment as seamless, showing little difficulty in adapting, while others admitted struggling with language limitations.

Language barriers and limitations will always be a variable or factor that may influence the experience of the participant. This was evident in the discussions in the previous tables. These varied strategies reflect the dynamic process of cultural negotiation, where OFWs continually adapt their communication styles to maintain harmony between their heritage and the host society.

3.2. Discussion: Integrated Narrative Analysis Approach

The researchers opted to utilize narrative analysis as an additional tool to better explain or elaborate on the gathered data. This was done after the researchers finished the thematic analysis and data interpretation. The top two major themes, with the highest frequency, are further explained below using the participants' responses to the research interview:

Theme 1: Maintaining Connection

Digital communication as the main medium for maintaining connections.

"I am using digital communication Daily to my families and friends back in Philippines" (P3)

"I use it to call them and to remind them how much I value them." (P1)

"With Messaging apps like WhatsApp, and messenger." (P2)

"I use Facebook and messenger to keep in touch" (P4)

These responses highlight the adaptability and versatility of OFWs in Sweden, demonstrating that digital communication serves as the primary tool for maintaining contact and familial ties. Messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Messenger, and Facebook are also utilized. Generally, this section underscores the importance of technology in shaping digital communication.

Theme 2. Language Barriers

Language differences are a frequent challenge among OFWs.

"It would be through language because in Sweden, although you speak English you need to learn Swedish." (P1)

"Speaking the swedish language is a must it leads to isolation sometimes when you dont speak the language" (P4)

"I faced discrimination and having a hard time to learn their language." (P3)

These responses offer insights into how the inability to use the local language creates social challenges for OFWs. Even if they are fluent in the English language, it is expected of them to learn the Swedish language. This causes trouble for the OFWs to manage their livelihood and simultaneously learn the language. This, in turn, leads to more specific problems, such as discriminating and isolating the OFWs by the Swedes.

With these two major themes in mind, even with a small set of participants, it is evident how technology plays a vital role in shaping communication among individuals, especially in the Filipino diaspora in Stockholm, Sweden. Although this is a clear illustration of how OFWs adapt in context, the language barrier still poses a dilemma, as it is something that cannot easily be changed or addressed.

Therefore, communication plays a vital role in shaping one's identity. Though it is just a contributing factor, the observed pattern suggests that culture is shaped by one's own perspective. The majority of participants have demonstrated diverse methods for practicing a Filipino-like life while living in a foreign country. With this in mind, the communication and cultural identity of the Filipino diaspora differ from one another, showcasing their social and livelihood experiences living far from home.

4. Conclusion

This study highlights that communication serves not only as a means of connection but also as a cultural anchor for OFWs in Sweden. While food, language, celebrations, and digital tools may appear as visible practices, their deeper significance lies in enabling migrants to reconcile with distance, sustain a sense of belonging, and negotiate their identity in a foreign land. The findings reveal that cultural identity in the diaspora is not static; it is a living process shaped by daily acts of preservation, the pressures of integration, and the constant balancing between self-expression and acceptance in the host society. Ultimately, communication emerges as both a survival strategy and a source of resilience, underscoring its role in maintaining "Filipinoness" across borders. This study proposes that recognizing communication as both a cultural anchor and a

coping mechanism allows policymakers, communities, and institutions to design programs that not only address integration challenges but also affirm cultural resilience, ensuring that OFWs remain connected to their heritage while thriving abroad.

It is recommended that future research increase the number of participants and extend coverage to different regions of Sweden to capture a broader and more diverse range of diaspora experiences. Since this study reflects only the context of OFWs in Stockholm, its findings should not be taken as representative of all Filipino migrants in Sweden. Policymakers, community organizations, and embassies are encouraged to design support programs that integrate cultural preservation, language assistance, and psychosocial services while recognizing the unique circumstances of each diaspora setting. Expanding both the scope and inclusivity of future studies will not only strengthen the evidence base but also ensure that diaspora support initiatives are grounded in the lived realities of Filipino workers across varying contexts.

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