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Vlogger – The migration broker as a moral category¹

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Abstract

The entry shows how migration brokers in Poland construct employment brokerage in moral categories, and how these blurred boundaries manifest in their narratives. In looking at the case of Tina, a Filipino influencer and non-obvious employment broker in Poland, it reveals the ambiguity in brokers' roles, intentions, and morality, and how these relate to formal and informal practices.

Theme

Mobility infrastructure

Keywords

brokerage, ambiguity, morality, vlog, livestream, authenticity, sociology of formality, Filipinos

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Migrants seeking work abroad often turn to employment brokers. These brokers sometimes perform morally ambiguous roles, ambiguous in that their operation is characterised by some inaccuracy and can be subjected to more than one interpretation. They help migrants find work, but they can also play a role in their exploitation. Brokers and local agents are however often necessary for successful migration and employment³. The piece looks at Tina, a micro-influencer who uses her lifestyle YouTube channel to help fellow Filipinos looking to work in Poland. As a kind of non-obvious broker, Tina is engaged in a morally ambiguous game. While she constructs herself as an authentic and independent vlogger (video blogger) acting purely in the interests of her followers, she is also employed by an employment agency to attract potential workers. In analysing Tina's livestreams, this entry questions common sociological assumptions about the connections between formality (in her role representing the employment agency), which, from her audience's perspective, is supposed to be clear and moral acting, and informality (her role as an "independent" vlogger), a context in which Tina's goals are not clearly defined, and which thus also influences different perspectives on her moral behaviour.

Brokers and employment agencies as moral categories

“Morality” can be defined as a socially determined set of reference points which establish what is right and wrong. Viewing behaviour from the perspective of the moral category is about assessing whether there are certain moral expectations about a particular social role. Morality is difficult to conceptualise uniformly, especially when confronted with social and cultural contexts inhabited by different actors, such as those involved in migration infrastructure⁴. An interesting example of the need to take into account the moral differences of various market actors is the activity of employment agencies. Indeed, the moral ambiguity of such agencies has long been controversial⁵.

According to Polish law, employment agencies are to focus on matching specific clients with potential employers. Agencies who deal with migrants are primarily responsible for organising the translation and signing of employment contracts, providing employees with information about entry, residence, and employment regulations, and ensuring they register on arrival in Poland⁶. But today, agencies often provide other migration and employment-related services such as organising transport or accommodation⁷, even if migrants interested in working in Poland could arrange these themselves. In this context, employment agency practices are made particularly ambiguous by the fact that they delegate tasks to unscrupulous subordinate field agents whose supervision is often beyond their control and whose behaviour is open to different interpretations⁸.

³ Xiang, Biao and Lindquist, Johan. 2014. Migration infrastructure. *International Migration Review* 48(1): 122–148; Lindquist, Johan. 2015. Of figures and types: brokering knowledge and migration in Indonesia and beyond. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21(S1): 162–177; Lashchuk, Iulia and Pawlak, Mikołaj. 2020. *Entry to the market, not to a state. Situation of migrant workers in Poland*. Budapest: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lindquist, Johan. 2015. Of figures and types: brokering knowledge and migration in Indonesia and beyond. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21(S1): 162–177.

⁶ Lashchuk, Iulia and Pawlak, Mikołaj. 2020. *Entry to the market, not to a state. Situation of migrant workers in Poland*. Budapest: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung: 14.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Philibert, Jean-Marc. 1982. Will success spoil a middleman? The case of Etapang, Central Vanuatu. In: William Rodman and Counts Dorothy (eds.). *Middleman and Brokers in Oceania*, Ann Arbor: The University Michigan Press: 187–207; Xiang, Biao and Lindquist, Johan. 2014. Migration infrastructure. *International Migration Review* 48(1): 122–148; Lindquist, Johan. 2015. Of figures and types: brokering knowledge and migration in Indonesia and beyond. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21(S1): 162–177; Haxby, Andrew. 2021. The ambiguity of price and the labor of land brokers in Kathmandu, Nepal. *Economic Anthropology* 8(2): 247–258.

Successful migrants often become informal brokers themselves⁹. And, as such, their moral choices are often even more complicated and opaque. Migrant-brokers often experience divided loyalties¹⁰ between members of their community or people sharing similar experiences, and toward those on whom their successful stay in a given country depends, such as employers and agencies. Indeed, brokers are often seen as hustlers who exploit the poor to enrich themselves¹¹.



Figure 1: Filipino restaurant in Warsaw, 2023. Photo by the author.

“Sociology of the interaction between formality and informality”¹²

Morality can be analysed in relation to formal and informal practices. The literature points to a clear and conceptually developed way of examining the relationship between formality and informality¹³. Sometimes informality can direct our thinking to practices that are not entirely visible, creating a field for the manipulation of knowledge and for bad intentions or, in other words, an immoral field. In turn, formal activity can appear more transparent and honest, and therefore moral. While informality does not require official arrangements and may consist, for example, of altruistic advice, formality requires clearly indicating specific duties such as official employment contracts.

Here, the concept of the broker as a moral category, in relation to formality and informality, seems even more complicated. Koster and van Leynseele observe that “brokers explore and re-emphasise the (blurred) boundaries between distinct economic and political rationales and

⁹ Xiang, Biao and Lindquist, Johan. 2014. Migration infrastructure. *International Migration Review* 48(1): 130; Lindquist, Johan. 2015. Of figures and types: brokering knowledge and migration in Indonesia and beyond. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21(S1): 166.

¹⁰ Philibert, Jean-Marc. 1982. Will success spoil a middleman? The case of Etapang, Central Vanuatu. In: William Rodman and Counts Dorothy (eds.). *Middleman and Brokers in Oceania*, Ann Arbor: The University Michigan Press: 204.

¹¹ James, Deborah. 2011. The return of the broker: consensus, hierarchy, and choice in South African land reform. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17(2): 319.

¹² Mica Adriana, Winczorek Jan and Wisniewski Rafał (eds). 2015. *Sociologies of Formality and Informality*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH: 14.

¹³ Ibid.

moralties”¹⁴. Meanwhile, Lindquist claims that brokers are an anthropological category that constantly mediates between the formal and the informal, and should not be considered automatically immoral¹⁵. There is clearly ambiguity in this regard. A broker can maintain both existing barriers and control the flow of information (such as about job possibilities), facilitating and hindering positive communication between the local and the global.

The sociology of the interaction between formality and informality is less concerned with a clear distinction between the formal and informal, and more with revealing how the two are entangled. This interconnectedness is illustrated by brokers who, as actors in the migration infrastructure, often have to navigate between the formal and informal, and to make decisions that may be morally questionable. I suggest that vloggers engage in a game with an authenticity that I paradoxically not related to what they disclose in their narratives, but to what they omit.

A Filipino vlogger-broker and the game of authenticity

Potential migrants often look online for information about employment abroad. The role of new media is significant because it blurs the boundaries between formal and informal cooperation¹⁶, especially when a good such as work abroad is being sold. The internet is also a space for variously oriented creative and business activities, including intermediation¹⁷. Moreover, as the apparent power of influencers grows, there is an increasing academic, media and public interest in the roles they play in labor intermediation.

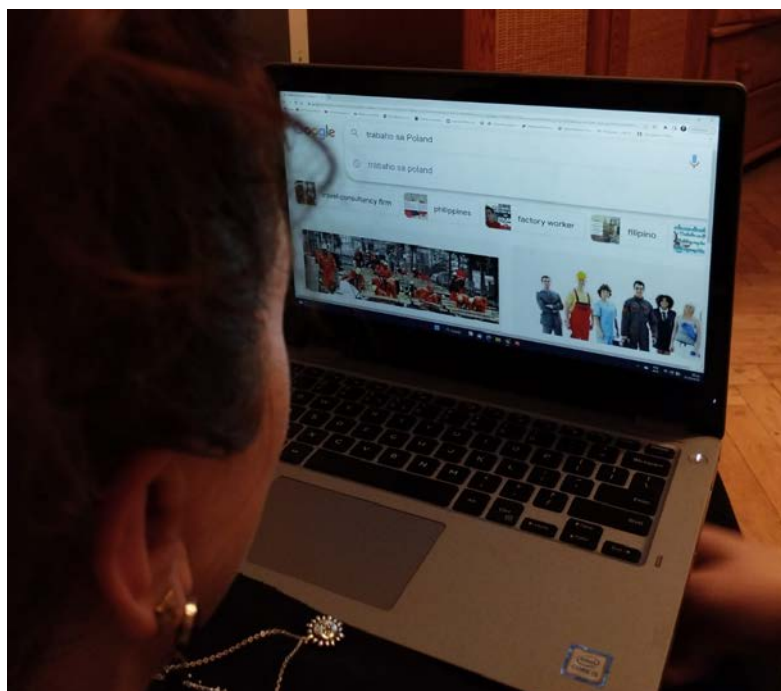


Figure 2: Searching for jobs in Poland. Photo by the author.

¹⁴ Koster, Martijin & van Leynseele, Yves. 2018. Brokers as Assemblers: Studying Development Through the Lens of Brokerage. *Ethnos* 83(5): 808.

¹⁵ Lindquist, Johan. 2015. Of figures and types: brokering knowledge and migration in Indonesia and beyond. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21(S1): 163.

¹⁶ Misztal, Barbara. 2015. Configurations of Informality and Formality in Contemporary Society. In: Adriana Mica, Jan Winczorek and Rafal Wisniewski (eds.). *Sociologies of Formality and Informality*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH: 108–109.

¹⁷ Lindquist, Johan. 2015. Of figures and types: brokering knowledge and migration in Indonesia and beyond. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21(S1): 165.

In this piece, I look at a livestream by a Filipino influencer in Poland. I call her Tina. On her YouTube channel, which has 10,000 followers, Tina provides ‘independent’ lifestyle advice on various subjects, including information for people interested in working in Poland.

At the same time, Tina also features on an employment agency’s official channel. During a livestream in 2021, she revealed that she worked for the agency as a marketing manager responsible for handling complaints about her agency and for improving the agency’s image. Declaring that currently she works as a customer relations services officer, Tina emphasised that she no longer has access to information about how the agency is dealing with customers-migrants issues. However it was difficult to understand what exactly her role was because during the broadcast she also recommended herself as a broker of choice for viewers who decided to take advantage of her agency’s offer. Regardless, she both recommends the agency and provides contact details for its brokers. In short, Tina is not a typical broker, but rather a micro-celebrity who also offers brokerage. Her status as a broker is unclear mainly because norms of conduct for micro-influencers are not institutionalised.

Tina presents herself as friendly and relatable by drawing on broadly understood lifestyle patterns. She shortens the distance between her and her followers by using phrases like ‘*kabayan*’ – which means a co-national person in Tagalog, or by calling them by name. For moral economy researchers, this personalisation of messages is essential in any information exchange, especially online¹⁸. She often states that she is doing something for the first time, that she cannot operate the equipment well, and that she should not be considered especially professional. She is a micro-influencer, or someone Abidin identified as focused on a private career in social media, but not as a person who acts according to a strategic marketing model addressed to specific recipients¹⁹. Probably thanks to that, she has gained greater sympathy than more professional influencers. Her narrative refers primarily to her own experiences, allowing her to break out in bursts of laughter, express care, doubt, or even irritation, which significantly narrows the distance between her and her followers and evokes positive feelings²⁰.

Whereas official information is difficult to access, Tina’s advice is readily accessible, easy to understand, condensed and treat as credible and ‘authentic’. Indeed, as the economic system and global institutional regulations become increasingly complex, individuals tend to increasingly rely on such informal sources for information²¹. But this can also produce unintended consequences, as a different perspective on Tina’s moral behaviour shows. From time to time, Tina avoids answering questions that may put the agency in a bad light, or refuses suggestions from other agencies which an ‘independent vlogger’ probably should accept. While boasting of her access to the agency’s list of brokers, she refuses requests by call-in viewers to check the specific status of their applications. And at the same time as declaring her pure desire to help everyone without exception, she emphasises that she has ‘secret’ knowledge gained through the agency that can help people quickly gain temporary residence. In short, her role as an agency employee suddenly overshadows that of an independent vlogger-helper.

¹⁸ Fourcade, Marion and Healy, Kieran. 2007. Moral views of market society. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 33: 289.

¹⁹ Abidin, Crystal. 2017. *Influencer Extravaganza: Commercial “Lifestyle” Microcelebrities in Singapore*. In: Larissa Hjorth, Heather Horst and Anne Galloway (eds.). *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*. London and New York: Routledge: 158–168.

²⁰ Lindquist, Johan. 2015. Of figures and types: brokering knowledge and migration in Indonesia and beyond. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21(S1): 171.

²¹ Misztal, Barbara. 2015. Configurations of Informality and Formality in Contemporary Society. In: Adriana Mica, Jan Winczorek and Rafal Wisniewski (eds.). *Sociologies of Formality and Informality*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH: 105–126.

During the livestream, another Filipino vlogger, Edwin, called in and questioned the purity of Tina's independent activities. Edwin scorned Tina for the practices of the agency she worked for. His remarks were dominated by observations identifying her as an informal broker whose activities distort the reality of migration to Poland, taking advantage of her online popularity by supporting an agency that has a history of unfairly treatment migrants. His most interesting remark illustrates the ambiguity of the broker's role, and the entanglement of their formal (in the agency) and informal (online) roles:

“You know why these people approached you, Tina? (...) You are in public, you always have videos and vlog, so they are trying to increase their reach through you, because they don't have any other way to reach your followers.”²²

Edwin accused Tina of removing negative comments on both her and the agency channel (such as information warning about unfair practices), and of misleading followers by presenting unrealistic, simplified 'information' about migrating to Poland, such as the possibility of bringing family from the Philippines. He also mentioned the mutual shifting of responsibility for failures between the agency and the vlogger²³, such as in the case of ineffective organisation of work for migrants.

Tina tries to answer Edwin's accusations by explaining that business is business, and that if the agency did not charge fees, it would not be able to operate or to recruit employees whose ultimate dream was to work in Poland. And she explains that negative comments may be removed by her or the official agency if they are offensive.

Ultimately, the exchange throws a spotlight on Tina's behaviour and shows her morality can be called into question. For some viewers, Edwin is likely to appear morally superior, even if it is unclear what his real purpose is in challenging her.

Blurring morality and immorality

Are Tina's actions immoral? Hornig emphasises that actors may consider another's behaviour immoral when their expectations are disappointed. To be considered immoral then, actions do not have to be wrong or intentionally hurtful²⁴. Perhaps Tina is simply trying to navigate the maze of practices which result from globalising world economies and the accompanying growth of bureaucracy. Ultimately, however, her intentions are not entirely clear. Her blurring of the boundaries between her experience as a vlogger, and the commitments to her followers which come with that, and her current job in the agency leads to morally ambiguous behaviour. Micro-influencers gain recognition and trust through their informality. But that can mean that hasty followers trust a person – or an employment agency – without adequately checking it through other sources.

Looking at how Tina mixes relevant information with simplifications or exaggerations, we may see her actions as immoral. But if we extract the pieces of good advice she offers (for example,

²² Livestream link has not been provided to preserve anonymity.

²³ Lindquist also wrote about the frequent rejection of responsibility by local agents, explaining their tasks as only delivering migrants to licensed intermediary agencies (2015, 167).

²⁴ Hornig, Laura. 2022. The 'Good' Employer: Mutual Expectations amidst Changing Employment Situations in Patheingyi, Myanmar. In: Lale Yalçın-Heckmann (ed.). *Moral Economy at Work: Ethnographic Investigations in Eurasia*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books: 37–56.

how to behave or dress when visiting a consulate to speed up the visa procedure) from a broader context, we have to conclude that the support she provides does help her followers. Nevertheless, although Tina helps migrants orientate themselves in the intricate maze of regulations in Poland, she intentionally omits some information (such as the numerous legal, organisational and financial difficulties associated with the possibility of bringing migrant families to Poland) which makes the game of authenticity especially visible here. Tina may have built her image as an independent, authentic online helper who was not a formal intermediary. But she was then employed by an agency, and no matter what role she was currently holding – marketer for the agency or independent vlogger – she negotiated the situation to suit her interests. In the process, the assumptions around formality and informality are turned inside out — an informal vlogger is moral, but she loses moral legitimacy through formal work as an employee. In short, formality and informality are tightly entangled with one another – and what Tina does for the agency, and what she does altruistically remain ambiguous.

Like other brokers, Tina benefits from role-play²⁵. She probably stopped being an informal vlogger when she signed the contract with the agency, although her new formality is also unclear. For the company, the significant number of followers Tina has is important, because she can promote its image and assist it in acquiring new employees. Indeed, that may explain why the agency hired her formally – to draw on the informal recognition she had gained from followers of her own channel. Again, this ambiguity is significant. While Tina does not charge to organise livestreams, but her true role is not even clear to followers, who become increasingly lost in what Tina actually does for the agency:

“Honestly guys, I am not paid anymore (...) for promoting them, so that’s why I feel really bad when I get a lot of negative comments about the company (...) And I don’t want to be stressed about it.”²⁶

In this example, immorality does not depend on gaining additional income (for her work for the agency), but on concealing the real obligations of the vlogger.

Tina’s main loyalty may be to her employer. Indeed, this loyalty is evident when she refuses to talk about other employment agencies. Moreover, the morality of her behaviour toward her followers is questionable, as she takes advantage of the strong feelings of liking and trust that they have for her. On the one hand, the fact that she occasionally allows critics to speak, and that she patiently attempts to respond to their accusations maybe be seen as an honest admission of guilt, but on the other hand, she admits to deleting comments that are unflattering to her. This situation illustrates well how there is ambiguity in the context of labour-brokering as a moral category.

While followers probably realise that the image of working in Poland that Tina presents may not be possible for everyone, they are also grateful that she provides information they cannot access elsewhere. Even after Edwin accuses her of operating in a grey zone, she does not seem to lose interest from followers, and they still ask questions. This is an important sign that they do not simply dismiss her as immoral. Followers reflect on and interpret vlogging conventions to filter the

²⁵ Haxby, Andrew. 2021. The ambiguity of price and the labor of land brokers in Kathmandu. Nepal. *Economic Anthropology* 8(2): 247–258.

²⁶ Livestream link has not been provided to preserve anonymity.

more reliable messages from the less. And they are well aware of vloggers (financial) entanglements. Paradoxically, Tina is useful to them for precisely this reason, and her possible concealment can be easily considered part of a game in which viewers are also involved, pretending that they do not realise the truth. Tina has entered into a certain game with authenticity. Sometimes she acts in morally questionable ways. But in the end, she is watched by thousands of people who gain valuable information from her. Her value as a broker is expressed by her ability to move between both formal and informal, where both her knowledge of procedures and the ability to establish relationships count.

Conclusion

The morality and immorality, as well as the formality or informality, of non-obvious migration brokers such as Tina is often ambiguous. Tina's actions can certainly be considered both moral and immoral, formal and informal. She is social and economic; she is 'authentic' in offering information that migrants want, but probably earns money for recruiting them; and she blurs a true commitment to her followers with agency work and the (financial) benefits that come with it. While the formula she has adopted (running a YouTube channel) has given her a larger audience than other opportunities, it has also made her role more ambiguous. In looking at this case study, my analysis has not aimed at finding clarity about the motives or actions of Filipino vloggers, but rather at presenting how ambiguity in their different roles manifests itself. Recent research on moral economy suggests that the contemporary image of a pure division between the market and non-market sphere does not exist²⁷, and that the ambiguity of (non-obvious) brokers' roles may become even more complicated in the future.

²⁷ Fourcade, Marion and Healy, Kieran. 2007. Moral views of market society. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 33: 301.