RECLAIMING THE NARRATIVE:
ONLINE DISCOURSES OF POST-PANDEMIC FUTURES

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ABSTRACT

The profound changes in our lives and understanding of the world because of the COVID-19 health crisis have greatly affected both our personal and social well-being. In addition, the narrow way by which dominant structures have controlled the meanings we can make of this global concern tended to result in totalitarian, punitive but ultimately ineffective measures. The study is focused on mapping out the various ideas and sentiments of Filipinos regarding post-pandemic scenarios and possibilities by tracing discourses of post-pandemic futures circulated via online content and platforms. Qualitative, discursive, and exploratory in approach, different data sets from different online platforms were gathered, initially analyzed for word salience, and finally thematically unpacked with attention to discourse. Mainly, the topics of "health," "economy," "governance," and "people" formed the most prominent thematic threads resulting from the initial word frequency analysis. However, upon closer reading of the data sets, the study contends that imagining a healthier and more inclusive post-pandemic future for the country rests on the principles of integration, complexity, and revaluing of human life and welfare. Results of the study are hoped to inform policies and programs that aim to create a more just and robust future for Filipinos beyond the confines of the present pandemic.

Keywords: *COVID-19, post-pandemic future, online discourse, human life and welfare*

INTRODUCTION

The profound changes in our lives and understanding of the world because of the COVID-19 health crisis have greatly affected our personal and social well-being. The WHO (2021) reports 170 million cases and more than 3 million deaths globally due to COVID-19. In the Philippines, the Department of Health has recorded more than 1.6 million positive cases and close to 30,000 deaths as of the beginning of August 2021 (DOH, 2021). The country has been subjected to one of the longest and strictest lockdowns in the world, which some commenters say are a means for the Duterte administration to tighten its control over avenues of dissent, further threatening human rights and free speech (Diokno in See, 2021). Alongside draconian measures, the economy has suffered as evidenced by a decline in GDP, increase in unemployment, and folding of businesses (Hapal, 2021). The crisis has clearly revealed the vast inequality in society as the poor, women, children, and the elderly have had to suffer greater economic deprivation, violence, and abuse (Gonzales, 2020; Hapal, 2021; Mercado, 2020). It is within this context of structural disparities that people have had to endure personal physical, emotional, and mental distress caused, in no small amount, by physical and social isolation.

Adding to the distress is the narrow way by which powerful structures have sought to take control of the meanings we can make of this global concern. Butler and Athanasiou (Butler, 2013) argue that crisis situations are governmental opportunities for the state and the market to limit people's understandings of the situation, that is, to only allow discourse which promotes neoliberal and authoritarian interests without alternatives.

Analyzing viral social media posts shared by those at the frontline battling COVID-19 and those who have had to cope with loss resulting from the pandemic, Cordero (2021) surfaced three main themes that resonate with the Filipino psyche: *sákit* (pain), *pighati* (grief), and *pag-asa* (hope). This insight is germane to the study not only due to the emotional possibility of going from pain and loss to recovery and hope as seen in people's narratives, but also because of the salient place that new forms of media occupy in these troubled times.

Other studies in varied contexts (e.g., Chee, 2020, Heilferty et al., 2021, Tsao et al., 2021, and Venuleo et al., 2020) concur with the observation that narratives of life in the COVID-19 pandemic straddle the extremes of fear, weakness, vulnerability and courage, strength, and hope. This suggests that coping and resilience are as much a foundation of the pandemic's meaning as distress and disruption. These narratives and their potential meanings, moreover, are significant on both a personal idiosyncratic and structural or systemic levels.

Cipolletta and Ortu (2020) and Venuleo et al. (2020) refer to the idea of "turning point" in their analysis of people's narratives of life in the pandemic with emphasis on how the crisis could potentially change the way we relate with others in the spirit of empathy and care along with the possibility of doing things differently on a larger scale.

Taking back control over the meanings and narratives that we make of the crisis also allows us to imagine a post-pandemic future that is built on social equity and justice. Narrative Initiative (Hynes & Swenson-lengyel, 2020), a social collective for envisioning a different kind of future, for instance, is adamant that there should be no returning to a pre-pandemic system and advances a narrative strategy that emphasizes a governance free from market control, confronting inequality, valuing all work, and belief in people's capacity to enact change. In the country, such a governance model is potentially what will reverse the negative impact of the pandemic on our well-being.

Looking toward the future entails conceiving it as a "social fact," a multidimensional and comprehensive relations of power manifested through discursive and material construction of possibilities that are rooted in the present but are also undoubtedly configured by a "politics of expectations," where certain aspirations become dominant while other possible outcomes are relegated to the margins (Beckert & Suckert, 2021). Bell (1996) argues that a meaningful and relevant science of society involves taking "time" seriously as the consequences of present actions always occur in the future. Since the pandemic has forced us onto the cusp of overwhelming societal change, it is wise and just to adopt a futurist-oriented understanding of the human condition because: "The future does not have to be-nor should it necessarily be-like the past" (Bell, 1996, p. 53).

Preparing to address future possibilities is not only concerned with oncoming social trends, predictions, or patterns, but also with alternatives for the future (Huber & Bell, 1971). To acquire an initial mapping of how different sectors might orient themselves toward the future during the pandemic, the study aims to explore the meanings of the COVID-19 pandemic in people's lives and imagine possible Philippine post-pandemic scenarios via online discourses. Specifically, the goals are:

1. to understand people's representations and sentiments of the COVID-19 crisis in their lives (before, during, after the crisis) via online discourses (e.g., social media, websites) and
2. to construct a discursive infrastructure that enables diverse conceptions of possible post-pandemic scenarios.

METHODOLOGY

This project is qualitative in approach and adheres to the notion of emergence as research design accepting that the "process may change or shift after the researcher enters the field" (Creswell, 2013, p. 47). In other words, while there is a well-planned course of action, the exploratory character of the topic necessitates openness to change and willingness to adapt on the part of the researcher to gain the best possible results.

Following the theory of discourse particularly as outlined by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), the study references the concept of *point de capiton*, originally formulated by Jacques Lacan, in explaining how a "master signifier" acts as a particular element or sign assuming a "universal" structuring function within a certain discursive field. In other words, we take the discourses of post-pandemic futures gathered from the various online cases as a way for people to provisionally make sense of their present and think about the future. Constructing the future, in this sense, is premised on deploying privileged discursive points of partial fixation of meanings. These discursive points are what we attempted to consolidate in the analysis knowing full well that discourses of the future are partial and provisional since they are made and continuously remade following shifts in context.

Data Gathering Procedure

The study mainly employed online data capture. Methodologically, focusing on online data offers a potentially vast and diverse source of insights about the topic especially since we aimed to gather materials from all possible websites that are afforded by keyword research. While the method is limited to discourses about post-pandemic possibilities from those individuals and institutions who have access to the internet and can produce online content by virtue of knowledge, skill, or position, given the current limitations on collecting data face-to-face, this study aimed to take advantage of the rich, varied, and voluminous data available online.

Online data collection was implemented from August 25 to 28 and particularly for social media, only content or posts made from January 1 to August 28, 2021, were considered. This limit in timing assumes that after over a year of living in the pandemic, various sectors would have gained insights that are relevant to both making sense of life amid the global health crisis and envisioning a future after the pandemic.

It should be noted that this period is prior to the declaration of the Delta variant becoming dominant in the country. Findings from this dataset should therefore be understood in this context.

Keyword search was implemented in two platforms: 1) Search engines: Google, Bing, Yahoo; and 2) social media: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube. These were chosen since they are the most popular in the Philippines in terms of market share (Statista Research Department, 2021). The online data gathering protocol consists of clearing the browser's cache and search history before running each search so that no algorithms from prior search activities influence the search. The following key phrases were used in the search (in quotation marks to implement the Boolean operator that specifies the exact combination of terms): "post-pandemic philippines", "post pandemic philippines", "postpandemic philippines", "post-pandemic pilipinas", "pilipinas matapos pandemya", "pilipinas pagkatapos ng pandemya"

As the team had to collect this data using their own machines, it was important to arrive at a common protocol for this. Given our backgrounds and orientations (as belonging to the same institution and working in psychology, political psychology, developmental psychology, critical discourse studies, and media studies), it can be expected that conducting an online search using our own machines may yield results different from other users'. For example, among the things that Google considers when providing search results is the information about individual users' location, search history, and search settings ("How results are automatically generated", n.d.). Reflecting on our own unique backgrounds, and to collect search results that are closer to what the "average" result may be, we cleared our browsing history, signed out of our own accounts, and created mock accounts, when necessary, before going online to collect data. The intention was not to capture the "real" or "true" results of such a search, which is almost always highly individualized, but to collect a range of results that our individual, personal engagements with these various search engines and social media platforms might constrain.

For the search engines, only the first five search engine results page of the "All" category were considered. For social media sites, a mock account was created for the study to avoid the influence of any algorithms attached to existing accounts. All content modalities (i.e., texts, images, videos, music, etc.) were gathered, transcriptions of YouTube videos were generated, and only unique content (duplicates were removed) was included in the final data sets. Overall, there is more content in English gathered from different online sources and platforms. Although Filipino search terms were also used, most of the articles found were in English. Table 1 presents a brief description of the data sets.

Table 1
Brief Summary of Data Sets

Data Set	Number of texts (cases)	Represented genre and modes
Search engine data		
Google	59 (43 unique)	Feature articles, news reports, opinion piece, institutional reports
Yahoo	45 (14 unique)	Feature articles, news reports, opinion piece, institutional reports
Bing	92 (74 unique)	Feature articles, news reports, opinion piece, institutional reports
Total search engine cases without repetition	131	
Social media data		
Twitter	87 (tweets)	micro-posts, hashtags, quoted pieces/excerpts, links to full articles
Facebook	90 (posts)	Short posts, hashtags, quoted pieces/excerpts, links to full articles, photos with caption, notices or announcements
YouTube	6 (videos)	Videos (webinars, personal)
Total social media data without repetition	183	

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) was used to initially process the data for the 500 most frequently used words for all data sets. Stop words or words that are commonly used in one language (e.g. "a", "an", "the") that carry little information were not included in the count. The team then discussed potential main topics (the "point de capiton" or discursive points to focus on) based on the most salient words from the initial software analysis and eventually teased out the themes, including the premises and implications within these topics. Following the basic principles of a discourse-centered thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the initially derived word salience could be seen as the semantic approach to developing themes while the co-constructed discourses resulting from the collective discussion is representative of thematic analysis at the latent level, in which underlying ideas and ideologies were construed to configure the semantic content of the data sets.

The following main topics were identified based on the initial analysis: health/healthcare/vaccine (and other related terms), people/social/public/community (and other related terms), government/policy/services (and other related terms), economy/business/work/finance (and other related terms).

Following a collective pluralistic interpretive approach (Clarke et al., 2015; Frost et al., 2011), data was examined from different angles informed by the different epistemological paradigms brought in by members of the research team, which allowed for "dialogic intersubjectivity" (Saldaña, 2013). This meant that the team aimed to benefit from and capitalize on the multiple perspectives and insights from each member rather than arrive strictly at an agreement. This process allowed for individual and collective reflection on our "readings" of the data and ensured that claims we made about them were well-argued and made sensible to others. We recognized ourselves as individuals who, like those who produced the data we collected and those who would potentially consume them, were also trying to make sense of the pandemic that affected each of us directly. The collective discussion of the potential discourses led to more nuanced themes and necessitated going back to the original texts to afford the analysis a fuller context in probing the ideas that had been foregrounded by word salience.

Although the data for the study is clearly multimodal (i.e., composed of texts, images, and videos), the analytic scheme implemented for the time being was not multimodal. In other words, the analysis and discussion were limited to the ideas presented by the verbal resources of the cases notwithstanding the potential contribution of other semiotic resources to the construction of pertinent discourses. This analytic direction can be explored later.

RESULTS

A total of 314 unique cases of varying forms were taken together and analyzed using NVivo to determine the most frequent words used to identify the most "salient" terms, topics, and possible themes that are more foregrounded than others (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) in imagining a post-pandemic future. An English translation of excerpts from the data is provided when necessary.

Sentiments Regarding the COVID19 Pandemic: Preliminary Word Frequency Analysis

Certain words can be readily seen in the visualization in Figure 1 as being foregrounded amid the constellation of all considered words. Health, government, economy (economic), and people are the key terms that were classified as conceptual anchors that guided the discourse-focused examination of the texts. These most salient words also acted as the base terms for related words (e.g., economy + economic + work; health + vaccine).

Figure 1
Word Cloud Visualization of 500 Most Frequent Words Used Across All Data Sets
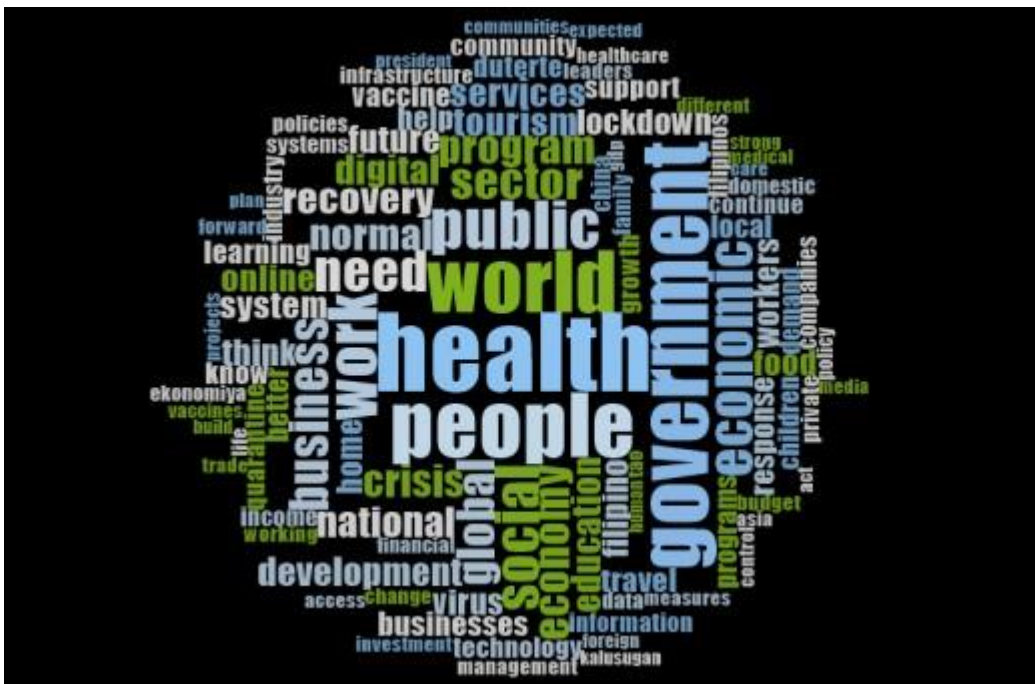
The subsequent discussion highlights the topics of health, economy, government, and people as starting points of more in-depth and critical assessment of constructions of post-pandemic scenarios that are particularly relevant to the Philippines. While the discussion that follows focuses on each topic separately and values how they are made sense of as issues that matter in realizing a more valuable future, there is also conscious attention to elaborating on the connections among them.

In general, the data demonstrate a positive outlook for the future – carving hope out of collective trauma, as it were. Many articles end on a positive note, providing words of hope and encouraging us to learn from our experience, as in this quote: "[M]ay we have a tighter grip on hope, compassion, and courage— that as we face a post-pandemic Philippines, we will dream again for the generations to come" (Matammu, n.d.).

Despite the optimistic mood of most of the articles, traces of pessimism are still existent. Collective trauma, for instance, is identified as a significant detrimental effect of the pandemic on people, something which needs to be adequately addressed for individuals and society to move forward:

> *Together with the rest of the world, Filipinos will experience sadness, loss and anxiety that will need to be acknowledged and treated to fully recover and move on* (Atienza et al., 2020).

How might such collective trauma be addressed? What direction might hope and courage be applied towards in the struggle to create a post-pandemic future? In the section that follows, we discuss the discourses that outline how health, economy, governance, and people are key areas for recovery and change in how a post-pandemic future is imagined.

Conceptions of a post-pandemic future: Imagining the future, revising the present

Health, healthcare, and wellness

There appears to be a close relationship between health and economy as shown by their salience in the preliminary word frequency analysis. The question of which between health and opening the economy should be a priority dominated debates around designing measures to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. However, pitting saving lives against salvaging livelihoods creates a false dichotomy that shuts down discussion crucial to coming up with more effective solutions to the complex issues at hand (Escandón et al., 2021). Ensuring the health and safety of individuals protects the very foundation of economic activities. On the other hand, poor communities with poor healthcare capacities are more vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic (Jensen & Molina, 2020).

Although not all texts zeroed in on health as the fulcrum of a propitious post-pandemic future, it certainly served as a background or context to other discussion points of some articles. Health manifests itself in the discourse primarily as a catalyst for change in longstanding practices that are seen as no longer feasible in the future (e.g., systemic neglect of the healthcare system). The following statement from Dr. Gene Nisperos provides a compelling argument in support of the need for systemic change in the way society regards health as an inescapable component of not only economic but overall well-being:

> *Pero siguro yung isang hinohope ko na sa post-pandemic, if mabibigyan talagang halaga yung health natin, yung health as a concept…hindi lang yung being able to access health care when you need it but being able to maintain a healthy life…So I guess we're hoping that a post-pandemic Philippines will not just return to the old normal, which is really bad, but something better. A better normal for everyone, especially those who are most vulnerable to illness* (Philstar Global & ISA, 2021).

> (But maybe one thing I am hoping for in the post-pandemic is for our health to be given actual importance – health as a concept…not only in terms of being able to access health care when you need it, but being able to maintain a healthy life…)

New health protocols are envisioned to become norms after the pandemic. This presupposes a more informed and concerned citizenry who are more aware of how they better protect themselves and others from disease. There is an expectation that consuming immunity-boosting products, keeping a healthier diet, and even buying prepaid insurance will increase in the future. Additionally, new health norms include better recognized and supported local health systems such as the Barangay Health Emergency Response Teams (BHERT) which can act as first responders for future health crises. The expected increase in health awareness beyond COVID-19 is ultimately founded on the responsibility to take care not only of the self but also of others' health and requires changes at the individual level and at the level of health systems.

Health is also understood as encompassing mental and emotional well-being, hence, the need for a multidimensional view of the traumatic effects of the current situation and a need to care for the physical, mental, emotional aspect of the self, as well as nurturing healthy relationships with others toward a strengthened community and holistic wellbeing:

> *These hopes for the post-COVID-19 world are a reminder to not take small pleasures for granted, a reminder to value our health and the health of others, a reminder of the need for human contact and community* (Rivera, 2021).

Unsurprisingly, the data largely argue for a need to emphasize the value of health. Overcoming current shortcomings as regards the valuation of people's well-being and systems of healthcare is seen to be a product of collaborative endeavors between different sectors, the state and civil society, as summed up in this statement: "a collective effort from the government and private sector is the key to defeat the global health crisis" (Amancio, 2021).

Economy, business, and employment

In response to the anxiety surrounding the matter at present, the area of business and economics is one of the larger and more consistent areas of concern found in the data across all platforms and channels. Indeed, there is a strong recognition of the drastic, negative impact of COVID-19 on our economy which has been described as needing "resuscitating" ("Coronavirus: Philippines plans record S$119 billion 2021 Budget", 2021) and "pinadapa ng pandemya" ("defeated by the pandemic") (de Guzman, 2021), with special concern for worsening poverty and the exacerbation of existing inequalities: "…blue collar workers, small businesses and the poor may see an extended decline, and would need further support" (Zobel de Ayala cited in de Guzman, 2020).

The "trickle-down" effect expected from infrastructure projects across the country, while appreciated by commenters, has also been criticized as not trickling down fast enough, and so leading to the recommendation for better support of the most marginalized sectors: small businesses, agricultural workers, and daily wage-earners. As found elsewhere, our data suggests that COVID-19 exposed how much of the work considered to be essential (food production, health, transportation services) is precarious, underpaid work (that in wealthier countries is done by migrant workers and women, see Leach et al., 2021). The existing dependence on overseas employment is seen to increase with the increase in poverty and uncertain (yet) recovery of the Philippine economy, given that this depends on improved health systems, vaccination rates, and consumer confidence.

In the texts there are two overarching themes within the topic of economy, business, and employment: the recognition of the connectedness of systems and actions and the need to adapt and change for economic recovery that is lasting and equitable.

The interrelatedness or co-dependence of multiple systems, which includes the economy, is a large theme that includes several specific subthemes. For instance, health systems and their improvement are often mentioned as a precondition to economic recovery – they dictate consumer trust and affect consumption in various industries: "[F]or the economy to recover, there must be strong support of the country's health system, policy reform and public sector support for business, and efforts to improve consumer confidence" (Zobel de Ayala cited in de Guzman, 2020).

Additionally, local, and international, micro, meso, and macro levels of action are all identified as important loci of attention or action. The example below highlights this unavoidability of consolidating efforts from different levels to establish solidarity and security of all those involved in the economic sector:

> *So, many parts of the country even as the pandemic raged, businesses started to protect their workers. Large companies...tried to protect their SMEs...Because they knew that there is strength in a solidarity response to this pandemic* (Mendoza in Rappler, 2021).

Another significant theme was the need for businesses to be nimble, to adapt, and to embrace change. The changes described cover systems, processes and the use of technologies to overcome the limitations on mobility due to lockdowns. However, they also include a shift in priorities or values, including the prioritization of health and well-being (of consumers and workers), environmental sustainability, empathy and kindness, and pleasure or quality of life. The following excerpts illustrate this point:

> *Kantar has identified five key behavioral shifts that will emerge and last through the post-pandemic world: heightened focus on protection, well-being, connections, flow, and experiences* (Valdez, 2020).

Governance, leadership, and politics

The theme of governance and politics is discussed in texts that comment on policies and plans that can be implemented to bring about recovery. There is strong concurrence in the data that many of the problems the government tried to address in the pandemic existed prior to it, hence, the perception that improved governance and politics are crucial to a post-pandemic future. It is clear from the data that the government did use and should use the experiences of the pandemic as a point of reorientation for its strategies and priorities.

A change in leaders is also identified to be important and discussed in various texts as brought about by a more actively engaged citizenry able to elect the most qualified leaders and hold them accountable.

COVID-19 was described as putting into sharp relief the existing faults of governance. From larger policy concerns down to issues of caring for the welfare of the ordinary citizen, critiques of current government response formed the beginnings of a vision for better futures. The poor (or lack of) response of the government and its debilitating impact on daily-wage workers was one case that exemplifies the problem with existing structures and that also demonstrates the ineffectiveness of a standardized top-down approach unable to account for on-the-ground specificities:

> *Paano ang ibang mas higit pa ang sitwasyon sa akin? Maaari din kayang sabihin sa nagugutom nilang mga anak na wala na kasing budget ang gobyerno. May mababasa pang huwag iasa lahat sa gobyerno. Paano kung limitado ang kilos ng lahat? Talagang lalabas para gumawa ng paraan. May magsasabi pang sana "nag-ipon kayo noon." Ano ang iipunin sa kulang pang sweldo? Talagang pakainin na lang, o ano ang ipakakain ng mga no work no pay na tulad ko lalo't patagal nang patagal ang lockdown* (Montesena, 2021).

> (What about those who have it worse than me? Can we also tell their hungry children that the government has no budget left for them? You hear statements like, we should not ask everything from the government. What if our movements are limited? Going out to make ends meet cannot be avoided. There are those who say, "you should've saved up." What can one lay aside from an insufficient salary? We have to eat, but how can no-work-no-pay employees like me have food in this lockdown that sees no end?)

The pandemic was seen to highlight the prevailing neglect of blue-collar workers and the informal sector – food vendors, cashiers, trash collectors, etc. – that have always served as the backbone of any city (Zinampan, 2020). It is for this reason that a post-pandemic scenario was imagined to include improved social services for the most vulnerable and marginalized, along with the prioritization of investments on social infrastructures, such as hospitals and social housing.

Although the government was described in the data as having adjusted, there were also descriptions of it as confusing, communicating poorly, and needing to support partnerships, be consultative and democratic.

For the most part, this largely negative view of the government's response stems from a perceived lack of consistent, evidence-based, and well-organized actions. For instance, one government program that was seen to exacerbate problems rather than solve them was the "balik-probinsya" program which increased people's mobility without having set down necessary health precautions, leading the spread of the virus throughout the country (Fernandez et al., 2020).

Apart from government systems, policies, and programs, leadership matters. According to one case, it is crucial that persons with competence in crisis management, proactiveness, resilience, and empathy are elected (Zinampan, 2020) as they can lessen our vulnerabilities in the future. This revision in political leadership is seen to be enabled by regular citizens who vote better and demand better from the government:

> *In the first place, we should be voting better, and expecting better from public servants…2020 has made it clear that the people we have placed in power have every intention of serving themselves, not the public* (Rivera, 2021).

We are compelled to revisit our decisions in the past as citizens to forge a future that is configured by wiser choices and greater imperative for holding those in power accountable. However, for this to be possible, for a shift in governance from the state to the people, sustained education and consciousness-raising of the public is necessary; in this way, citizens can demand from their leaders policies and actions that are backed by sound science and reliable evidence as opposed to populist and politically motivated claims (Camargo, 2020).

People and sociality

Owing to the highly personal impact of the pandemic, one main topic surfaced is "people". News articles, formal public fora soliciting the opinions of various experts and public thinkers, as well as personal blogs, essays and poetry from "regular" individuals were the common sources of such data. From discussions of how the pandemic has made an impact on people, three interrelated themes that describe a process of change were obtained: that people experienced suffering and trauma from the impact of the pandemic, that the current crisis is an opportunity for reflection, evaluation, and sense-making, which leads to the death of the old self and the birth of a new, improved self.

The first theme, that individuals are suffering and experiencing trauma from the prolonged lockdown, isolation, economic impact, and the compression of time and space, is found in discussions of the past and present state of individuals who have had to deal with the accumulated impact of all these conditions. There is a clear sense of pain and loss that needs to be addressed:

> *Together with the rest of the world, Filipinos will experience sadness, loss and anxiety that will need to be acknowledged and treated to fully recover and move on* (Atienza et al., 2020).

Additionally, articles identified a desire for normalcy (which includes simple physical interactions now made impossible), for "ginhawa" and for social change. In a forum where senior high school students posted questions on what would happen to the Philippines after the pandemic, responses included discussion of the return to normalcy ("Malaya ka nang makakalabas" or having the freedom to go out, and "face-to-face learning" in one article). More interestingly, there were also answers pertaining to hopes for the future ("Maraming Pilipino ang makapagtatrabaho na" or more Filipinos could go back to work, "giginhawa na ulit ang buhay dahil wala nang iniisip na sakit" or life will be more at peace since we are not worried about getting sick, "makakaahon na yung mga naluging negosyo" or businesses will be able to recover) ("Paghihinuha sa kalalabasan", n.d.) and calls for change ("gusto ko lang naman na matuto na sila sa nangyari" or I only want everyone to learn from this event) ("Ano Ang Pangarap", n.d.).

This experience has also been identified by observers as an opportunity for self-reflection, evaluation, and sense-making. This process included reevaluating how people conducted themselves and lived their lives; for instance, how they got basic needs, attended church, and conducted events and meetings. However, this also involved looking into one's values and priorities and even one's identity.

This leads us to the third theme – the death of the old self and the birth of an improved one. This theme's title was taken from one musician-teacher's reflection on their experience during the pandemic:

> *(…) ang realization ko this quarantine ay para mag-survive tayo nang maayos, kailangan in a way mabitawan natin yung nasa isip natin na kung ano tayo. (…) Kaya ako as a performing musician, hinaharap ko ang kamatayan ng Joey Ayala na performer. Hinaharap ko talaga yan kasi walang gig.*

> *Malay ba natin hanggang kailan 'to. So, yung energy ko, inilibing ko muna yung performer, nilipat ko yung energy ko sa content provider* (Ayala in PSME, 2020).

> (…what I realized in this quarantine is that for us to survive, we need to, in a way, let go of who we think we are. (…) That's why as a performer musician, I accept the death of Joey Ayala the performer. I accept that because there are no gigs. We don't know till when this will last. So, I buried, for now, my energy as a performer and shifted it to being a content provider.)

It appears that the acceptance of the death of the old is a prerequisite to moving forward. Many commenters remarked on Filipino resilience being a given, but also an outcome of the pandemic. Other articles identify characteristics of vigilance, sensitivity to one's privileged position, *diskarte*, and the value of *bayanihan* to be strengthened, more relevant, or more prominent not just for surviving the present but in building the post-pandemic future.

The data surfaces the possibility for individuals to question old ways of doing things, hence, creating space for more egalitarian and more sustainable practices, products, and services to replace old ones. This turn in values or character as necessary for a better Philippines is summed up best in the following:

> *To rebuild from the COVID-19 pandemic and create a better Philippines, we need to reset our paradigms and practices by balancing the interests of people, profit, and planet. The government, business sector, academe, civil society, and the public should work together in pursuing a shared vision of an equitable, sustainable, and resilient post-pandemic Philippines.* (PIDS, 2021)

The better self, imagined as emerging from the pandemic, is one who is involved in the well-being of others and whose strengths were forged out of this adversity are utilized to contribute to the pursuit of a better post-pandemic Philippine society.

DISCUSSION

Wording the post-pandemic world: Discourses of change, integration, and complexity

Farmer et al. (2020) suggest investigating the co-evolution of physical and social technologies through the notion of the "noosphere" as outlined by Teilhard (cited in Farmer et al., 2020): the integration of the biosphere, physical technology sphere, and social technology sphere in shaping the future of the world. A critical point that they make is that as society progresses, the need to see these three as deeply interacting only becomes greater since ultimately, they will be impossible to separate from one another.

The COVID-19 pandemic vividly illustrates the value of an integrative framework such as the noosphere. Zoonotic spillover diseases (involving animal-human transmission), although a common occurrence, are capable of transforming into pandemics under specific circumstances. Social technologies that we develop necessarily encroach upon other ecological spaces while the capitalist predilection for acquisition in the name of profit is a significant driver of vast and rapid ecological transformation. Ultimately, the understanding of how pandemics are born necessitates an appreciation of the intricate connections that are rendered invisible by our limited engagement with only some parts of the process. For this reason, Leach et al. (2021) contend that reconfiguring our models for development with proper accounting of the fragilities in current systemic practices must take seriously the highly complex and partly emergent character of different levels of relations from the human to the technological and the non-human in order to enact a "post-COVID-19 transformation."

Across all the data sets, there is, indeed, the prominence of the narrative of change. Echoing the premises of the notion of post-COVID-19 transformation, the imperative of change is enwrapped in the desire to achieve a kind of future that is capable of not only recovering what has been lost in the wake of the pandemic but also of realizing more responsive and just systems, more equitable allocation of opportunities, and better concern for people's overall welfare.

At the very center appears to be the health crisis serving as the impetus for change. However, upon closer scrutiny, the faults are seen to be cross-sectoral, trans-geographic, trans-ecological, and socio-technical. There is recognition, at least based on the data, of the already existing faults in the system of managing resources along with the design and implementation of overarching policies that favor some sectors at the expense of an overall just allocation of wellness and security. It has also been observed that there is the tendency in different places to gravitate to needlessly harsh, overly militarized, and totalitarian governmental regimes in the attempt to stop the spread of infection as quickly as possible and salvage the shattered economy. The greater risk lies in people and institutions internalizing discriminatory views (e.g., xenophobic, anti-poor, and sexist) as proper justification for cruel action against certain groups or sectors in the pursuit of controlling the virus (Dempsey, 2021). We need only to revisit news reports of individuals being severely punished (some resulting in death) in different parts of the country because of local officials "merely implementing" quarantine rules. With these conditions framing the current situation, the pandemic is also viewed as an opportunity to address and improve ways of doing things on various fronts. Practices, values, and services that were found to be working and beneficial are projected to be retained and adapted to the new and "better normal." Old ways that are inefficient, inequitable, and ineffective must be discarded.

Tracing the kind of change sought by the various voices represented in the accessed online platforms leads us to the proposition that the post-pandemic change we must collectively work for stands on the principles of integration and complexity as illustrated in Figure 2. For instance, going "digital" in the future, as expressed in the data sets, relies on careful integrative planning that is premised on equitable digital access. Aside from these two basic principles, efforts at enacting change should now have a renewed commitment to prioritizing marginalized and disenfranchised sectors – those who constantly face various forms of vulnerabilities – as a crucial component of primary development goals and programming. The issues that have been surfaced by the data are not new but many of them have remained unaddressed in past leaderships. These post-pandemic possibilities underline the need to be more sustainable, equitable, and humane toward one another. These imperatives form the underlying infrastructure to the presented post-pandemic scenarios. Knowing that these are the discourses available as afforded by the online data sets also offers hope for a better future for our country: that we will learn, take stock, and institute these needed changes to ensure a life that is far better than the present.

The main topic of "people" presented above prefaces the revaluation of the most vulnerable in society as a focal point in configuring a more viable post-pandemic future. In many of the online materials gathered, there is acknowledgement that the pandemic heightened our sensitivity to issues of privilege and the need to focus on the welfare of marginalized sectors. In the end, a future that values people, instead of partisan interests, is anchored on an "other-orientedness" as opposed to a "regime of othering."

Figure 2
The Discourse of Change in Imagining Post-Pandemic Futures
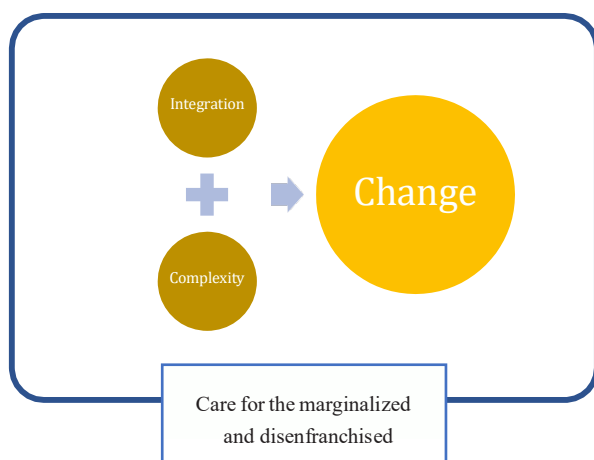
This short, but poignant, quote encapsulates the renewal of this perspective. In response to the question, "Ano ang pangarap mo sa Pilipinas pagkatapos ng pandemya?" (What is your dream for the Philippines beyond the pandemic?), the responder has this to say: "Gusto ko lang naman na matuto na sila sa nangyari palagi silang tumulong sa KAPWA" (What I want is for them to learn from what happened and always be there for their *kapwa*) ("Ano Ang Pangarap", n.d.).

Perhaps, there is no better time than now to revisit the Filipino value of "kapwa" (Enriquez, 1978) and seriously commit to its fundamental assumptions even as its theoretical potential can be geared toward the political: that we are no different from the other in terms of worth so that regardless of status, position, or power, one's ultimate task is to care for the other since in doing so, one is caring for the self.

CONCLUSION

Building a "better than before" post-pandemic future

In constructing a picture of how online discourses imagine a post-pandemic Philippines, the study accessed different genres, platforms, and modes of online talk about the future beyond the current global crisis. The most salient themes could be interpreted as the dominant ways of constructing the discourse of a post-pandemic future. If we take this to be true, then we can say that, based on the data, the future is configured by the discursive points of health, economy, governance, and the people.

However, taking a closer look at the data, what we argue is that there is a more fundamentally progressive way of imagining the future given the realizations that have been afforded us by the staggering impact of COVID-19 in our lives. Instead of the many specific concerns that are brought to the fore because of the inability of current systems of address to effectively protect the people, especially the most vulnerable ones, we contend that future possibilities should be anchored on an idea of change or transformation that itself is fastened to the nodal points of integration, complexity, and care for the vulnerable. As made clear above, these nodal points become necessary for a post-pandemic future that allows a kind of governance and growth that are inclusive, progressive, collaborative, and people centered. Insisting on these principles as the foundation of a better-than-the-present future is consistent with other studies that propose the revision of development and recovery models to transform the post-pandemic world.

In the main, this kind of discourse about the future is an anti-thesis to the prevailing, but largely ineffective, systems of capitalism and totalitarian regimes. The value of seeing a plurality of discourses, as shown by this study, is the chance at accessing the possibilities on offer and, perhaps, gain a better compass for navigating ideas and actions that potentially could transform words into reality.

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