NEITHER HERE NOR THERE: OTHERING, LIMINALITY AND BELONGING AMONG FILIPINO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN HUNGARY

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ABSTRACT: *This article examines how Filipino international students in Hungary experience and navigate multidimensional processes of othering, and how these experiences shape identity and belonging. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 16 Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship recipients, the study identifies five themes: three dimensions of othering – linguistic, racialized, and cultural – and two responses to these. The findings show that exclusion operates through language barriers in institutions and public spaces, racial misrecognition and harassment, and perceived cultural distance in everyday interaction. Students respond by withdrawing from situations in which they are likely to be rejected, building co-national sanctuaries, forming solidarities with other international students, and reframing unfamiliar social norms. The article contributes to the literature about international student mobility and belonging by showing how selective inclusion in a Central and Eastern European context produces not assimilation but the ongoing negotiation of relational, provisional, and transnational forms of belonging.*

KEYWORDS: *othering, international students, Filipino migration, belonging, liminality, Hungary*

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INTRODUCTION

The paradox of international student migration in contemporary Europe

Othering is a central mechanism through which dominant groups mark, classify, and marginalize those perceived as different based on race, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, or socioeconomic status. Othering is therefore a useful concept with which to examine contemporary student migration in Europe. Although international students are commonly imagined as mobile, highly skilled, and institutionally privileged, research has shown that educational mobility does not protect migrants from social exclusion. Black African students in the United Kingdom, Chinese female PhD graduates in Europe, and international students in Germany have all been shown to encounter racialized, linguistic, and social forms of exclusion that disrupt acculturation and belonging (Zewolde 2021; Liu 2021; Brill et al. 2025).

The literature on international student migration in Europe has yet to yield any published peer-reviewed studies focused on Filipino international students specifically in Hungary. As such, the author of this study acknowledges that it addresses a significant gap in terms of empirical evidence: While related concepts from adjacent fields of study (e.g., racism, language oppression and marginalization or alienation) help ground this investigation, it has not yet been confirmed whether similar phenomena affect Filipino international students in this geographic context.

Hungary is a particularly useful setting for studying this paradox. On the one hand, the country has often been characterized by political resistance to third-country immigration and by nationalist discourses that present non-European migration as culturally threatening (Hárs 2019; Földes 2022). On the other hand, labor shortages and internationalization policies have produced more selective forms of openness, including guest-worker recruitment and state-funded educational mobility (Bradford–Cullen 2025; Martuscelli 2024). Filipinos occupy a distinctive place in this configuration. They may be valued as desirable migrants so long as they are English-speaking, Catholic, and hardworking. However, when I say "valued," I mean valued conditionally and instrumentally appreciated – not accepted or incorporated as full members of society. *Conditional* in that Filipinos are appraised positively only when they have certain functions – as workers who will fill labor market gaps, students who will internationalize universities, or migrants who are rendered "compatible" in ways that do not disrupt prevailing ethnonational norms (see Ang 2019;

Zelenyánszky 2025). *Instrumental* in that Filipinos are valued only insofar as they can provide something of use – labor, tuition fees, or human capital. Their instrumental utility to the state does not make them social contributors with the ability to participate civically or be seen as authentic nationals.

This produces an *insider-outsider relationship*: Filipino students gain physical access to spaces of privilege and elite higher education and receive official state recognition (becoming insiders in the institutional sense), but remain susceptible to exclusionary practices (remaining outsiders in the social sense) in public spaces, as well as in institutional and interpersonal interactions. This tension can be situated in relation to wider trends in the Hungarian migration regime: The state selectively allows in non-European immigrants (like Filipinos) for instrumental goals such as supporting economic growth, filling labor shortages, and internationalizing higher education institutions, while society rejects their inclusion in the social fabric (Ádám–Golovics 2025; Bradford–Cullen 2025).

Research gap and research question

Despite the growing presence of Filipino students in Hungary due to the *Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship Program*, little published research has examined how they experience othering, identity formation, and belonging in this semi-peripheral European context. Earlier studies of Filipino migration have largely focused on labor migration, care work, transnational families, and migration in established Western destinations. The experiences of Filipino student migrants in Central and Eastern Europe remain comparatively underexplored.

This study addresses that gap by asking the question:

How do Filipino international students in Hungary experience multidimensional processes of othering – specifically linguistic, racialized, and cultural forms of exclusion – and how do they navigate, respond to, and make meaning of these experiences in ways that shape their identity and belonging?

Significance and contribution

The article makes three contributions. First, it extends research on Filipino migration by examining a new and under-researched educational migration corridor in Central Europe. Second, it contributes to scholarship on international student mobility by showing that formal inclusion through scholarships and universities does not necessarily translate into everyday belonging. Third, it

develops a multi-level account of othering by bringing together postcolonial theory, intersectionality, and social identity theory. This combined framework makes it possible to analyze othering as simultaneously historical and structural, relational and embodied, and psychological and interactional.

Case description: Filipino international students in Hungary and the Stipendium Hungaricum Program

Filipino migration to Hungary

Hungary has seen a recent increase in Filipino migrant workers. According to the Philippine Embassy in Budapest, there are an estimated 15,000 Filipinos in Hungary, a majority of whom work as guest workers in factories (Peñafuerte III – Pangan 2024). Immigration for work has been encouraged by the state due to the high demand for Filipino workers. The large wave of Filipinos migrating to Hungary is only one of many waves of Filipino labor migration to Central and Eastern Europe. Filipino workers also migrated east when job opportunities in traditional areas like the Middle East, Hong Kong, and Singapore began to be hindered by stricter foreign labor laws. Hungary has suffered worker shortages in manufacturing, logistics, and construction, and Filipino migrants have been sourced through bilateral agreements and private recruiters (see Ang 2019; Zelenyánszky 2025).

The *Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship Program*

Created in 2013, the *Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship Program* is Hungary's largest scholarship program. Established as part of Hungary's internationalization strategy and "Eastern and Southern Opening" foreign policy, the scholarship program serves as a tool for creating and strengthening political, economic, and educational relationships with non-European countries, particularly those in Asia (Árendás 2026). Partner countries' students are offered full scholarships, including tuition, accommodation in a dormitory, health insurance, and a monthly stipend, to pursue bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degrees in a variety of programs. The Philippines has been a partner country in the *Stipendium Hungaricum* program since the latter's early years. It is growing in popularity among Filipino students seeking a graduate degree in Europe as an alternative to more expensive and competitive countries like the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and Canada.

Hungary's neo-nationalist political context

The political context within which *Stipendium Hungaricum* operates is contested. In 2010, the political climate in Hungary dramatically shifted to the right as the Fidesz-led government fostered a neo-nationalist political discourse emphasizing national sovereignty, cultural homogeneity, and anti-immigration attitudes. The ruling party's migration policy approach has been termed "Fortress Hungary" (Martuscelli 2024). For instance, Hungary has fenced its borders, criminalized irregular migration, and organized several nationwide information campaigns against "illegal immigration." Political and media discourses constructed non-European migrants as threatening the national culture and identity of Hungary and framed them as a national security issue (Földes 2022; Bradford–Cullen 2025).

However, this exclusionary orientation coexists with functional economic openness. Hungary faces labor shortages in key parts of the economy due to demographic decline, the migration of Hungarian workers to Western Europe, and skills mismatches. These shortages have been addressed through guest-worker programs that recruit from the Philippines, Vietnam, India, and other non-European countries (Hárs 2019; Ádám–Golovics 2025). The *Stipendium Hungaricum* program follows a similar logic of institutionalized openness, serving foreign policy and internationalization interests but within strictly controlled parameters. The state partakes in international cooperation and promotes cultural exchange, while the temporariness and conditionality of student migration limit potential instances of the transgression of ethnonational boundaries.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A multi-level framework: Integrating three theoretical perspectives

This article theorizes othering among Filipino international students in Hungary using multi-level and multi-perspective lenses. The study develops a framework grounded in three theoretical perspectives – postcolonial theory, intersectionality theory, and social identity theory – that each focus on a different level of analysis: historical-structural, relational-embodied, and psychological-interactional. The framework shows how these theories work together to explain how othering is produced, experienced, and navigated.

To reconcile the three theories, I regard them as complementary rather than competing. Postcolonial theory allows us to understand the global hierarchies that position Filipino students as subjects of colonial power dynamics (explaining why their English competence and Filipino nationality are forms of capital that are "conditionally valued" and what it means to be recognized as migrants who are "compatible-but-not-equal"). Intersectionality allows us to see how differences (language, race, and institutional position) converge in particular incidents of exclusion (for example, in linguistic exclusion, racialized visibility, and as institutionally dependent "others"). Social identity theory allows us to understand what students do at the individual level to make sense of, resist, and cope with these experiences of exclusion (group identification, boundary management, cognitive reframing).

Postcolonial theory: Colonial echoes and enduring othering

Postcolonial theory helps explain how the social construction of otherness is sustained by unequal relations of power (see Said 1978). While Hungary was not involved directly in the colonial history of the Philippines, studies on migration from Central and Eastern Europe have revealed that postcolonial and racial hierarchies extend beyond colonial metropoles into the European semi-periphery (Narkowicz et al. eds. 2025; Zelenyánszky 2025). Hungary's involvement in global racial hierarchies can also be seen in how migration policy and public discourse demarcate desirable and undesirable migrants on racialized and civilizational terms (Ádám–Golovics 2025; Bradford–Cullen 2025). Furthermore, the conditional acceptance of Filipinos parallels what Zelenyánszky (2025) calls "institutionalised exclusion" in Hungary's "segmented labour market" – or regimes where migrants are granted admission on instrumental grounds but structurally precluded from full societal membership.

Filipino students come equipped with various forms of capital influenced by their own histories of colonialism and postcolonial development. Significantly, Filipino participants enter with English-language skills due to the United States' colonial-era policy that mandated English as the language of instruction in Philippine schools and a means of upward mobility (see Tupas 2015; Gonzalez 2018). This linguistic capital comes with educational capital due to the Philippines' history of mimicking American-style higher education systems and with certain forms of cultural capital that Filipinos are thought to have because of their assumed "Western" mindset and adaptability (Lorente 2017). Upon arriving in Hungary, participants may learn that their *Filipino-English*

– typically learned through the Philippines' own postcolonial context as a vernacular lingua franca – does not have the same value as "native English" in Hungary, and may not be consistently drawn upon to communicate on a daily basis, in an environment where one could argue that the general population harbors a strong aversion to English.

Filipino's ambiguous attitudes towards Hungary are also affected by a sense of ambivalence. Filipinos have been discursively positioned in Hungary as particularly desirable migrants due to their work ethic and Christian values (Laky 2025), mainly through guestworker recruitment programs and student mobility (Ang 2019; Zelenyánszky 2025). However, while Hungary is a predominantly Christian-majority country, one can safely say that shared religious identity does not automatically lead to church-based integration or social acceptance. As Bonifacio and Angeles (2010) have argued (not specifically about Hungary, but about Filipinos abroad), religion can both promote and inhibit integration.

Intersectionality theory: Layered exclusions

Intersectionality theory (see Crenshaw 1989) provides a framework for analyzing how race, gender, class, nationality, language, migrant status, and institutional position interact to produce specific forms of marginalization. For Filipino international students, exclusion is not reducible to one axis. A hospital encounter, for example, may involve linguistic vulnerability, racialized visibility, health vulnerability, migrant status, and a lack of institutional support at the same time. Similarly, public harassment may be experienced not only as interpersonal hostility but as the convergence of racial categorization, linguistic difference, and spatial vulnerability.

Recent research supports this claim. Liu (2021) shows how gender can intensify racialized exclusion for Chinese women PhD graduates. Lendák-Kabók (2023) demonstrates how language proficiency intersects with ethnicity and gender in higher education. Mahmud (2025) shows that migrant othering is produced through overlapping emotional, physical, spatial, linguistic, and embodied dimensions. These studies help position the present article's analysis of Filipino students as an intersectional account of othering rather than a single-axis account of racial, linguistic, or cultural exclusion.

Social identity theory: In-group bias and the struggle for belonging

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel–Turner 1979) explains the psychological and relational mechanisms through which othering becomes meaningful in everyday life. Individuals develop their self-concept partly through group memberships, and group boundaries shape belonging, status, and self-worth. When Filipino students are repeatedly categorized as outsiders, they must manage not only practical exclusion but also the effects of that exclusion on identity. The concept of "communitas" (Turner 1969) – a sense of shared liminality and egalitarian bonding — helps in explaining the shared solidarity among co-nationals and other international students who are in similar position of being an "outsider."

This perspective clarifies why participants respond by strengthening co-national ties, seeking solidarity with other international students, selectively integrating with Hungarians, or creating hybrid forms of belonging. Neville (2024) shows that repeated micro-aggressive encounters can produce depersonalization among minority students; microaggressions explained as verbal, nonverbal, or environmental slights that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages toward certain groups (Pierce 1970; Sue et al. 2007). Brill et al. (2025) show how othering can limit access to support, while Hu and Cheung's (2024) meta-analysis suggests that out-group status is negatively associated with social integration, especially for non-European populations. Pio and Essers (2014) propose an important corrective by emphasizing that migrant professionals do not merely absorb imposed identities; they also resist, reinterpret, and decenter otherness.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study employed a qualitative interpretative phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experience of being othered among Filipino international students in Hungary (Smith et al. 2009; Van Manen 1990). This approach was appropriate because the study focuses on how participants experience, interpret, and give meaning to exclusion, identity, and belonging in everyday life. The analysis, therefore, treats participants not simply as sources of information but as meaning-making subjects whose narratives reveal how othering is lived, remembered, and reinterpreted.

Participants

The study is based on interviews with 16 Filipino international students enrolled in Hungarian higher education institutions under the *Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship Program*. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, including networks connected to the Filipino student community in Hungary. Inclusion criteria were Filipino nationality, current enrollment in a Hungarian higher education institution, at least one academic year of residence in Hungary, and receipt of the *Stipendium Hungaricum* scholarship. Participants included six women and ten men studying social sciences, humanities, engineering, health sciences, business, arts, and education. Length of residence ranged from one to more than three years, allowing the study to capture both early adjustment and longer-term adaptation.

Table 1. *Participant's demographics*

Pseudonym	Gender	Field of study	Years in Hungary	Age range
Mike	M	Social Sciences	2–3	25–30
Raymundo	M	Engineering	1–2	25–30
Alisa	F	Health Sciences	3+	30–35
Jacobe	M	Humanities	2–3	25–30
Jaime	M	Business	2–3	25–30
Alejandro	M	Social Sciences	3+	30–35
Rina	F	Arts	2–3	25–30
Kate	F	Education	1–2	25–30
Cassius	M	Social Sciences	2–3	30–35
Nikka	F	Humanities	3+	30–35
Geronimo	M	Engineering	2–3	25–30
Jenny	F	Health Sciences	2–3	25–30
Aisha	F	Social Sciences	1–2	25–30
Jason	M	Business	2–3	25–30
Gary	M	Social Sciences	2–3	25–30
Joaquin	M	Humanities	2–3	25–30

Source: Compiled by the author.
Note: Names of interviewees were pseudonymized.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting between 60 and 120 minutes. Interviews were conducted either in person or through Microsoft Teams, depending on participant preference and availability.

As part of a larger research project, the interview protocol covered:

1. pre-departure expectations;
2. first encounters with Hungarian society;
3. experiences of exclusion in institutional and public spaces;
4. language- and race-based encounters;
5. strategies for navigating exclusion;
6. changes in identity, and
7. relationships with Filipino, international, and Hungarian communities.

All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were written immediately after each interview to record contextual details and reflexive impressions.

Data analysis, trustworthiness, and reflexivity

The analysis combined phenomenological interpretation with thematic coding. I read transcripts repeatedly to identify recurring descriptions of othering, belonging, and identity negotiation and formulated codes based on candidate themes and refined them by comparing examples of these themes across participants. I increased the credibility and reliability of codes by debriefing and checking my results with participants, thick description, and an audit trail documenting analytical decisions. I traced quotations back to participants' accounts, and distinguished descriptions from interpretative claims.

I occupied an insider-outsider position as a Filipino international student in Hungary studying under the *Stipendium Hungaricum* scholarship program. This position facilitated rapport and cultural understanding, but it also created the risks of over-identification and assumed commonality. To address these risks, I kept a reflexive journal, wrote analytic memos before and after interviews, engaged in peer debriefing with non-Filipino researchers, and actively searched for disconfirming evidence. This reflexive practice helped balance empathetic access with analytic distance.

Ethical considerations

The research received approval from the appropriate Institutional Review Board of Corvinus University of Budapest as part of a larger project. Participants received information about the purpose, risks, and voluntary nature of the study and provided informed consent. Because the Filipino student community in

Hungary is small and highly interconnected, particular care was taken to protect confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used throughout, and potentially identifying details were removed or modified while preserving analytic meaning. Participants were also given the opportunity to review quotations before their inclusion in the manuscript.

FINDINGS

Five themes emerged from the analysis: linguistic othering, racialized othering, cultural othering, strategies for navigating othering, and liminality and transformation.

Table 2. *Overview of themes and sub-themes*

Theme	Sub-themes	Key exemplar quote
1. Linguistic othering	Shock of language-related (English) exclusion; institutional vulnerability; invisibility in public spaces; the ambivalence of learning Hungarian	"I was expecting that... maybe they could speak English. I mean, it is Europe... But it was very shocking." (Mike)
2. Racialized othering	Misrecognition; physical violation; racial mockery; spatial exclusion	"…he slapped my hand." (Jacobe, incident at butcher's)
3. Cultural othering	Cultural distance; the wall of social reserve; Hungarian friendship as slow intimacy	"…they have this social barrier... a wall [preventing them from] get[ting] too warm to you." (Jaime)
4. Navigating strategic distance (othering)	Strategic distance; Filipino sanctuary; international solidarity; cognitive reframing	"I do not know how I will survive without the Filipino community." (Jacobe)
5. Liminality and transformation: becoming neither here nor there	In-betweenness; widened perspectives; transformed identity	"I am a changed person... Hungary shaped me." (Alejandro)

Source: Compiled by the author.

Part A: Dimensions of othering

Linguistic othering: The gatekeeper of exclusion

Linguistic othering was the most immediate mechanism through which participants experienced exclusion. Many arrived with the expectation that

English would function as a reliable medium of communication in Europe. For participants from the Philippines, English is not merely a "foreign language;" it is a form of colonial and educational capital associated with mobility, employability, and academic competence. In Hungary, however, Filipinos discovered that their English fluency was not as valuable a resource as they presumed it would be.

Mike recalled: "I was expecting that... maybe they could speak English. I mean, it is Europe... But it was very shocking." The participant's expectations that English would be spoken widely and easily across Hungary were grounded in a number of factors. First, English is taught and positioned in Philippine contexts as the language of mobility and global opportunity; thus, participants were socialized to believe that English would help them fit in abroad (Tupas 2015; Gonzalez 2018). Second, participants formed their ideas about Europe based primarily on representations of Western Europe – the United Kingdom, Germany, Nordic countries – i.e., places they know have a high level of English proficiency, and applied that understanding to Hungary. They did not have information about linguistic life in Central and Eastern Europe. Third, information provided through the *Stipendium Hungaricum* scholarship application and orientation process noted that courses would be taught in English and that English would be the medium of instruction, but perhaps did not make it clear that day-to-day tasks in Hungary – doctor's appointments, managing administration at government offices, shopping – would require a certain proficiency in the Hungarian language. As Mike's comment suggests, equating "it is Europe" with "they speak English" conflates Europe as a geographical category with its multilingual regions.

The implications of linguistic othering – by which I mean Filipinos being denied access to services or recognition due to the fact that they do not speak Hungarian – proved most severe in healthcare-related interactions. Alisa recalled a time when she was near death: "There was a time that I was almost dying, like really dying, that I really needed the ambulance... If you do not speak Hungarian, then they cannot help you."

This exclusion is felt through institutional processes (i.e. needing Hungarian-speaking translators for medical appointments), in public exchanges (i.e. being ignored whilst speaking English to another person), in daily life, and in the knowledge that to be accepted as part of Hungarian society they need to know the language. The shock felt by participants was not that there was a language barrier they would have to overcome – this is something that is expected when migrating to another country – but that the English skills they thought would "get them by" in Europe were not enough.

Kate described a similar incident involving a friend who needed emergency care: "We went to the hospital for an emergency, and we were turned away... [we were] told that we cannot have any checkups because we should have a Hungarian-speaking person with us." These examples illuminate how formal inclusion into health care systems does not guarantee substantive access. While participants were formally included in the public health care system through the scholarship program's medical insurance provisions, claiming healthcare services was another story. One could simply posit that Filipinos should learn Hungarian, as many immigrants are expected to do. However, this does not take into account how long it takes to learn enough Hungarian to communicate about one's healthcare needs (see Vange et al. 2024) – Hungarian is a non-Indo-European language with very complex grammar; many of the participants were in Hungary for a limited amount of time as students, not immigrating there permanently; and institutions failed to offer interpretation services or accommodate patients with language needs in emergency situations. The problem is not that Filipinos are "entitled" to receive healthcare in English – they are not – but that institutions that claim to include international students should be accountable for making that inclusion substantive, not just formal. The healthcare accessed by participants was less about Hungarians intentionally excluding them and more about institutions not accommodating the international students that they recruit to Hungary (see Atiku–Adofo 2025).

Linguistic othering also shaped ordinary public interactions. Rina explained that speaking English could make her socially invisible: "When you speak English to them, they do not really […] They just ignore me. Even if I ask, [for example], a waitress... they would completely ignore me." Language competence was also a source of ambivalence for those who learned Hungarian. Alejandro characterized Hungarian as "both a blessing and a curse" because knowing Hungarian meant he could understand when people were saying bad things about international students behind their backs. He described hearing one of his Hungarian coworkers saying to another, "What are the internationals doing?" While this might be construed as an innocent question, Alejandro understood it as implicitly questioning whether "internationals" should be there at all. The fact that we cannot know if the coworker intended this question to be hostile is itself an example of microaggressive exclusion: while it may not have been intended as such, the question was interpreted that way because Alejandro had witnessed repeated instances of othering.

Racialized othering: The embodied mark of difference

Racialized othering also took place when respondents felt that Hungarians ignored their identities as Filipinos and simply perceived them as "Asians." Jacobe shared that a Hungarian called him "Kínai" (Chinese in Hungarian): "But then although I have Chinese blood, I am not Chinese by nationality. So, I knew for a fact that they are talking about me." This statement itself is interestingly ambiguous. Perhaps the Hungarian speaker was referencing Jacobe's Chinese ethnic roots – he would have been correct in this case – or perhaps the speaker assumed Jacobe was Chinese by nationality; in this, he would have been wrong. Regardless of the intended meaning behind the Hungarian speaker's comment, Jacobe seems to have interpreted this "slur" as an erasure of his identity and its replacement with a broad racialized label.

This also took more direct and more embodied forms. Jacobe recounted how: "I was at Interspar… pointing at the part of the beef that I wanted because I don't know Hungarian… [and] the butcher slapped my hand." The uncertainty Jacobe experienced after this event about whether this behavior was due to miscommunication, language, race, or "*all three things"* is itself telling: participants had to interpret ambiguous events – that might have other explanations, such as hygiene-related reasons for not wanting someone hovering over the meat – through their own accumulated histories of exclusion. Analytically, the point is not whether incidents like these are definitively "racialized," but that participants endured them as potential examples of being treated differently on account of whom they were assumed to be. Even if the butcher's slap was rooted in a concern for cleanliness rather than bias, for instance, no attempts at communicative accommodation nor bodily understanding accompanied it.

Mike described Hungarians racially mocking them with phrases like "fucking ching chong" that seemed directed at his Asian appearance or what Hungarians presumed his language to be. Aisha and Jason described spatial exclusion in a restaurant: "There was this restaurant that when we entered, she [the waitress] said they were closed. But then after we walked out, they accepted Hungarian customers." Such moments turned abstract out-group status into embodied experience. Participants were not only told that they were different; they were made to feel that difference through voice, gesture, service denial, and physical treatment.

Cultural othering: The wall of difference

Participants also experienced othering through perceived cultural distance in everyday interaction. Participants often described Hungarian sociality as reserved, quiet, or difficult to enter, in contrast to what participants described as Filipino norms of warmth and sociability. Jaime used the metaphor of a wall: "Here in Hungary they have this social barrier... a wall [preventing them from] get[ting] too warm to you. In the Philippines, we are usually warm [from the start] already." Jacobe similarly described Hungarian public life as strikingly quiet compared with the Philippines, where people are "very talkative."

This cultural distance did not mean that Hungarian friendships were impossible. Rather, participants described Hungarian relationships as requiring time, patience, and interpretive work. Cassius used the metaphor of an onion: "[One n]eed[s] to peel the layers before they open up... They are like onions... You need to have time." Alejandro used a different metaphor, describing Hungarians as "chewy candy:" initially hard or rude on the surface, but deeply loyal once a person enters their circle. Nikka's account supported this interpretation. She described a Hungarian friend who had accompanied her to the doctor, translated for her, and offered practical help, explaining that Hungarians can be "very loyal and protective" once they consider someone a friend. Hungarians made Filipinos feel like cultural others not by treating them with hostility but only by taking a long time to befriend them and become close to them.

Part B: Responses to othering

Navigating othering: Strategies of resistance and belonging

Participants did not respond passively to othering. They developed strategies for managing exclusion, protecting themselves, and building alternative spaces of belonging. One strategy was selective distance. Geronimo stated: "There is a part of me that [does] not want to adopt their culture... If you do not want to be friends because of my nationality? Then so be it. I do not care." Jenny similarly described former Hungarian colleagues as "just colleagues, civil," indicating a boundary between professional coexistence and emotional attachment.

A second strategy was to construct the Filipino community as a sanctuary. Jacobe explained: "I do not know how I [would] survive without the Filipino community... They are really part of my support system." Alisa said that living with Filipinos made her feel accepted, while Jaime connected belonging to food and shared meals: "We have dinners where we just make Filipino food. I feel

at home." In these accounts, the Filipino community did not simply reproduce national identity abroad; it offered emotional continuity, practical help, and a space where participants did not need to translate themselves constantly.

A third strategy involved forming solidarities with other international students. Shared marginality created immediate points of connection. As one participant put it, international students were "also alone," and therefore looking for peers who could relate. Gary explained that he felt "more settled" with the international community and that it was "a bit more closer." These friendships offered a form of "communitas" grounded not in shared nationality but in shared displacement.

Finally, participants used cognitive reframing to manage the emotional demands of othering. Cassius summarized this through the phrase: "When in Rome, do what the Romans do... I am here to adapt; they should not adapt to me." Such reframing does not erase exclusion, but it allows participants to interpret unfamiliar norms as difference rather than only rejection. This strategy may protect self-esteem, although it can also place the burden of adaptation primarily on the migrant.

Liminality and transformation: Becoming neither here nor there

Participants' experiences produced a liminal identity (Turner 1969). They were not simply Filipinos temporarily located in Hungary, but neither did they become fully Hungarian. Their time abroad changed how they understood themselves, their home country, and the wider world. Joaquin described this as the development of a "globalized perspective." Jaime explained that living abroad had helped him overcome stereotypes about other cultures. Alejandro stated directly: "I am a changed person... the way Hungary shaped me... It is really different now."

This transformation is central to the article's title. Participants became "neither here nor there" because their identity no longer fits neatly with a single national location. They remained connected to the Philippines through language, food, family, and co-national community, but their experiences in Hungary have also changed their values, habits, and sense of possibility. Liminality therefore involved loss and disorientation but also expanded perspective and new forms of self-understanding.

The alternative communities' participants created were meaningful but limited. International friendships, for example, were temporary. Cassius observed that such relationships could be "a little bit superficial because everyone knows we are not going to stay here for long." Co-national communities offered comfort

and recognition, but they could not replace family and longstanding relationships in the Philippines. Jacobe emphasized the limits of digital communication, insisting that "nothing beats the physical presence."

Belonging, then, did not appear as a stable endpoint. Participants did not simply move from exclusion to integration. Instead, they assembled partial forms of belonging across Filipino, international, and Hungarian networks. These forms were real but fragile; supportive but incomplete; transformative but marked by absence. The students' lives in Hungary were therefore defined less by assimilation than by continuous negotiation.

DISCUSSION

Conceptual convergence: Explaining Filipino students' experiences in Hungary

The findings demonstrate the value of a multi-level framework for analyzing othering. Postcolonial theory helps explain why participants expected English to function as mobility capital and why they became disoriented by their discovery that English was not as useful in Hungary. This also helps explain the conditional recognition of Filipinos as useful or compatible migrants without full social equality. Intersectionality clarifies why specific incidents cannot be understood through a single axis. Alisa's hospital experience, for example, was not only about language. It also involved bodily vulnerability, migrant status, dependence on informal networks, and institutional unpreparedness. Jacobe's supermarket incident similarly combined racialization, language difficulty, public vulnerability, and uncertainty and possible misunderstanding about the motive of the butcher.

In addition to institutional unpreparedness, it is notable that participants' experiences of exclusion were exacerbated by a lack of cultural preparedness for life in Hungary. Before arriving in Hungary, many participants had limited knowledge of Hungarian society, language, or norms beyond what was associated with the *Stipendium Hungaricum* application and generic expectations of Europe (Árendás 2026). This lack of cultural preparedness – which also characterizes migration broadly, since people tend to believe they know more about the societies they travel to or live in than they do – only compounded the initial shock of facing a language barrier as well as racialized experiences and social codes. But part of this disconnect also had to do with how the scholarship program attracts students from outside of Europe without completely equipping

them for the nuances of living in Hungary – a semi-peripheral European country with rigid ethnonational barriers.

Social Identity Theory helps explain how participants responded to these experiences. The Filipino community became a strengthened in-group that provided recognition and support. International student friendships created alternative in-groups based on shared outsider status. Strategic distance and cognitive reframing allowed participants to manage the psychological effects of exclusion. The empirical material, therefore, shows that othering is not merely imposed from outside; it is also interpreted, resisted, and reworked by those who experience it.

Hungary's paradox of selective inclusion

The Hungarian case reveals a paradox of selective inclusion. The government formally welcomes Filipino students through scholarships and university enrollment. Yet participants' narratives show that such inclusion is conditional. They are allowed to enter institutions but may struggle to access health care, public services, and everyday social recognition on equal terms. They are visible enough to be racialized, yet not always recognized as full social participants.

This phenomenon of "inclusion without belonging" has been described many times before and in many contexts within migration studies. Literature abounds on how migrants are included at institutional levels of labor markets, education systems, or citizenship regimes but experience social exclusion and marginalization from full membership in society (see Castles–Davidson 2000; Yuval-Davis 2012). Similar dynamics have been described with regard to international student mobility: i.e., in how international students become included as paying customers of higher education institutions and tolerated temporary residents, but may be socially excluded, discriminated against, and not welcomed into society nor provided with meaningful routes to belonging (Buckner et al. 2026; He 2026; Merabet 2023). Scholarship on migration in Central and Eastern Europe has noted how migrants from outside Europe can be "included" without being "integrated" in countries like Poland – i.e., accepted as workers or students but not as members of society nor granted civic belonging or channels for participation (Narkowicz et al. 2025). These results add to the literature on being included without belonging by providing an account of how this can happen through the mechanisms of exclusion and othering, as described in this research article: specifically linguistic exclusion, racialized hypervisibility or invisibility, perceived cultural distance, and institutional incorporation.

Neither here nor there: The emergent identity

The phrase "neither here nor there" captures the identity produced by this condition. Participants were no longer positioned entirely within the social and cultural world of the Philippines because migration had transformed their perspectives, routines, and aspirations. At the same time, they did not become fully incorporated into Hungarian society because language, race, institutional barriers, and cultural distance continued to mark them as outsiders.

This liminal status is neither unique to Filipinos nor unique to Hungary: this transformation of identity has been well researched in the field of migration. However, it is the particular configuration of liminality here – produced through the postcolonial devaluation of English, conditional acceptance by the neo-nationalist Hungarian state, and particularities of race within Eastern and Central Europe – that makes their position noteworthy. Their liminality does not arise simply from being subjected to a generic "international student experience;" rather, it is produced through the overlapping hierarchies of global race relations, Hungarian border and migration management, and Filipinos' own postcolonial realities.

However, this liminality was not only a deficit. It also created the possibility of new forms of belonging. Students built what may be called "archipelagos of belonging: islands of connection" across Filipino households, international friendships, university spaces, online ties, and occasional deep relationships with Hungarians. These connections did not produce a single home, but they enabled students to live meaningfully across multiple worlds. Belonging therefore emerged not as a place one enters once and for all, but as a practice built through relationships, translation, and everyday negotiation.

CONCLUSION

Summary of findings

This study examined multidimensional experiences of othering among 16 Filipino international students in Hungary and analyzed how these experiences shaped identity and belonging. I identified five themes. Linguistic othering appeared through the devaluation of English, difficulty accessing services, institutional vulnerability, and invisibility in public spaces. Racialized othering appeared through misrecognition, racial mockery, embodied violation, and spatial exclusion. Cultural othering appeared through perceptions of Hungarian

reserve, social distance, and the slow work required to form friendships. Participants navigated othering through strategic withdrawal, Filipino community support, international student solidarity, and cognitive reframing. These experiences produced a liminal identity: participants were neither fully anchored in the Philippines nor fully incorporated into Hungary. Finally, the study showed that belonging remained partial and provisional because alternative communities were meaningful but limited by time, distance, and the absence of long-standing family and home-based networks.

Contributions of the study

The study contributes to theories of othering by showing how postcolonial, intersectional, and social identity approaches can be integrated without reducing exclusion to a single level of analysis. Postcolonial theory explains the historical and global hierarchies through which Filipino students become conditionally valued yet subordinated. Intersectionality explains how exclusion is compounded through language, race, nationality, health, gender, class, and migrant status. Social Identity Theory explains how participants protect and reconstruct the self through in-group formation, selective integration, and boundary management. Together, these perspectives show that othering is structural, embodied, relational, and psychological at the same time.

In addition, the research fills an empirical gap. It represents the first published peer-reviewed research on Filipino international students studying under the *Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship* in Hungary. This extends existing research concerning Filipino migration to a country outside recognized labor migration destinations and corridors and involves the study of education migration corridors.

Finally, this article contributes to studies on international student mobility by showing that formal practices of inclusion, such as scholarships or universities, do not equate to day-to-day belonging. Findings around linguistic exclusion, racialized visibility, and cultural distance showcase how othering can occur even when students are integrated into programs designed to promote institutionalized mobility in the name of international exchange and cultural understanding.

Limitations

The sample consisted only of *Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship* holders; Filipino students who self-finance their studies may encounter othering differently. Hypothetically, those who self-finance may either experience less exclusion because they have more financial capability and agency to decide to study in Hungary and are less institutionally dependent; or they might experience more exclusion because they do not receive institutional assistance and connection with certain communities like scholarship students do.

Due to this limitation, the results of this study cannot be generalized to encompass the experiences of all Filipino students in Hungary. These findings are likely generalizable to non-European international students under *Stipendium Hungaricum* scholarships, particularly those from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, in relation to the processes identified in this study. However, the forms and severity of othering that these students experience may look different depending on nationality, race, and individual differences. Studies should be conducted on students from specific countries to determine their applicability.

Future research directions

Future research could follow Filipino students longitudinally from arrival through graduation and post-study transition to examine how othering, identity strategies, and migration intentions evolve over time. Comparative studies with other Asian students in Hungary, such as Vietnamese, Mongolian, Kazakh, or Chinese students, would help distinguish what is specific to Filipino experiences from those more broadly shared among non-European international students. Quantitative studies could examine the frequency of different forms of othering and their correlation to measures of well-being, academic performance, and social integration. Research with Hungarian students, faculty, healthcare workers, and institutional staff would also help illuminate how host-society perceptions contribute to or mitigate the production of othering.

Final reflection

The Filipino students encountered complex experiences relevant to their educational journey in Hungary. Mobility meant more than studying abroad. It drove them to become different persons – to experience exclusion and adaptation, friendship and vulnerability, and *translation* – by which I mean the never-ending

process of learning to interpret unfamiliar social norms, cultural practices, and institutional expectations; of *translating* language but also *translating* culture, social cues, and emotion; and of making oneself intelligible to others who do not share the same cultural background. The experience of being othered – ignored, mocked, excluded, or made dependent on others – was painful, but it also became part of a broader process of transformation. Participants' narratives show that belonging is not simply granted by an institution, a visa, or a scholarship. It must be practiced, negotiated, and rebuilt in everyday relationships. For Filipino international students in Hungary, home is therefore not only where one comes from or where one arrives. It is also the fragile, unfinished space created in between.

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