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Being a Foreigner During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Researcher Positionality in Online Interviews

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Key words: international migration; Japan; online interview; pandemic; researcher positionality

Abstract: In the project underlying this article, I investigated the shift in the researcher-interviewee relationship in the process of online interviews with migrants in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers in feminist interview methods have discussed the intricate and shifting power dynamics with study participants, while other scholars have examined the advantages and disadvantages of online interviews. However, researchers have not sufficiently analyzed the shifts in positionality that occur during online interviews. Using the concept of "being in the moment," I examined how my online interviews with migrant participants facilitated, prevented, and transformed my positionality as a researcher in relation to them while I performed fieldwork during COVID-19. My main findings were that both the participants and I were able to share background information prior to the interviews due to the prevalence of social networking services (SNSs) after the outbreak of the pandemic. This alleviated the potential distance created through the research. Furthermore, the migrants and I found commonalities as foreigners living through the pandemic. Thus, I concluded that online interviews provide opportunities for the researcher and interviewees to seek commonalities through sharing various social and professional moments during the research process.

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1. Introduction

"*Onaji-desune* [It's the same for me]! You're also in a similar situation,"[1] said Lan during our online interview in 2022 upon learning that I was a female foreigner employed in Germany. Lan was a young female Vietnamese professional working in Japan. Her expression clearly echoes the field of feminist social sciences which highlights the influences of the researcher's biography and background on her relationship with interviewees, interpretation of data, and production of scientific knowledge (BEST, 2003). Not only did Lan reply to my questions in vivid detail during the interview but also, once the recording stopped, she talked passionately about her professional and social life in Japan and asked about my life as a foreigner in Germany. Throughout numerous other online and offline interviews, it became to me clear that Lan's reactions were not unusual; when I told other interviewees that I was a Japanese national living and working in Germany, they frequently made similar comments when discussing their experiences as a foreigner in Japan during COVID-19. Thus, amidst the sudden changes in people's lives during the pandemic, the interviewees and I often sought commonalities during the research process. [1]

Faced with a labor shortage, Japan has begun to accept a growing number of foreign workers in various industries (ISA, 2023), although the country has resisted the introduction of an official migration policy (ROBERTS, 2018). When the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe, Japan temporarily restricted the (re-)entry of foreigners to the country—even those with valid visas. This move was strongly criticized as *neo-Sakoku*[2] in reference to the closure of Japan's borders during the 17th and 18th centuries, which stemmed from a fear of potential internal political instability due to exchanges with other countries (BANYAN, 2022; VOGT & QIN, 2022). In this study, drawing from literature on feminist interview methods, I examined how the researcher-interviewee relationship was established and how it shifted in the process of online interviews during the COVID-19 period. Conducting fieldwork during the pandemic constantly challenged how I positioned myself as a researcher and whether I conducted interviews as an outsider or insider depending on the particular research context. [2]

Furthermore, COVID-related restrictions on daily life in Japan exposed researchers to multiple constraints when conducting fieldwork compared with pre-pandemic times. For example, numerous social events were canceled or shifted online, and people were asked to talk as little as possible in cafés and restaurants. Moreover, researchers indicated that a shift from offline (face-to-face) to online interviews amplifies the question of their positionality, since online interviews can hide or suspend the process of establishing rapport with interviewees (KIM, WILLIAMS, ELDRIDGE & REINKE, 2021; RICK, 2023). By contrast, the absence of others in an online space may encourage interviewees

1 I performed all of the anonymization and translations from non-English quotes and texts.

2 The literal English translation is "closed country."

to report more honest answers than they would in an interview conducted in a public venue (SELF, 2021). [3]

However, how the researcher-interviewee relationship is (re)shaped and established during online interviews remains under-researched. Therefore, I aimed to demonstrate how this relationship shifted before and during the online interview process. I conducted interviews—most of which were online (29 out of 34)—with Vietnamese information technology (IT) professionals in 2021 and 2022. I found that the distance between myself as the researcher and the study participants was gradually established. Based on my fieldwork during the COVID-19 pandemic, I determined that sharing different biographical and situational moments, including being in similar moments as foreigners during the pandemic, assisted the co-establishment of a researcher-interviewee relationship. [4]

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: In Section 2, I review the literature on researcher positionality from works on feminist interview methods and migration. Then I examine discussions of offline and online research methods. In Section 3, I explain the concept of "being in the moment" and why it assisted me in analyzing my interview data. I considered "moments" to be long-term and fluid time sequences as opposed to positioning them as specific events because the researcher-interviewee relationship is not simply born out of a single event but rather begins to be shaped prior to the interview when the individuals check each other's background. In Section 4, I introduce the background of this research project and the methods I used. Next, in Sections 5 and 6, I present my findings and analysis. Lastly, in Section 7, I provide the discussion and conclusion. [5]

2. Positionality of Researchers From Feminist Perspectives During the Pandemic

2.1 Divergent identities as a researcher

Scholars of feminist interview methods have raised the issue of the researcher's positionality. OAKLEY (1981) was the first to criticize the traditional interview method for assuming a "masculine" approach; for example, interviewers are expected to be objective and distant from their study participants. Since then, instead of a focus on the researcher being an objective interviewer, scholars have shifted the focal point of the debate on researcher positionality to look more at the power dynamics between researcher and interviewee (BOTTERILL, 2015; GANGA & SCOTT, 2006). Furthermore, scholars have added that feminist research seeks to identify power asymmetries in the researcher-interviewee relationship (HERRON, 2023; KELLY, 2019; OAKLEY, 2016), which is potentially born out of the differences in their class, social, economic, national, and ethnic backgrounds (BEST, 2003; ENGLAND, 1994). This imbalance of power can stem from differences in knowledge and experiences (COUSIN, 2010; WRAY & BARTHOLOMEW, 2010), which accumulate and are transformed during the research process. [6]

The White researcher BEST (2003) investigated how racial identities were negotiated during research. She conducted interviews with young organizers of a prom in a mixed-race high school in the United States. The interviewees shaped a narrative in such a manner that the researcher was able to pick up crucial issues in the studied context, such as through double-checking whether she had understood slang or narratives specific to the interviewees' life in the high-school context (ibid.). Without social, racial, and professional background commonalities, this double-checking of information and knowledge by interviewees was necessary for an information-seeker (i.e., researcher). This research relationship can create a power imbalance among two actors, and questions regarding the researcher's positionality always emerge as crucial focal points for methodological issues. [7]

From a feminist perspective, scholars have accentuated the need for "reflexivity" in research. This means that researchers must understand the effects of their social background, accumulated knowledge, and experience on their research process (HAMILTON, 2020) to alleviate the power hierarchy. Notably, the binary division of a researcher's identity into "insider" and "outsider" components has been questioned (CARLING, ERDAL & EZZATI, 2014), and scholars have also discussed the fluidity of the insider and outsider identities (BOTTERILL, 2015; VAN MOL et al., 2013). NAPLES (1996, p.84) explained this fluidity as follows: "'[O]utsiderness' and 'insiderness' are not fixed or static positions, rather they are continuously shifting and permeable social locations that are differentially experienced and expressed by community members." Some migration scholars have even specified different types of "insider" and "outsider" identities, which reveals how intricate these categories are (CARLING et al., 2014). Even though researchers and their interviewees may have some commonalities in their identities, this does not necessarily afford the researcher insider status. [8]

In the context of migration studies, an "insider" is defined as a researcher who (often) shares the same or similar migration and other backgrounds of the studied migrant population (GANGA & SMITH, 2006, §1). By contrast, an "outsider" is a scholar who is not a part of the studied migrant population (CARLING et al., 2014). The "insider" position is touted to facilitate researchers' access to the migrant groups that they aim to study, as they would share some ethnic and national background with the studied group. For instance, CARLING et al. mapped out various typologies of researcher positionality in their study of migrants in Norway. They stated that differences even existed among those with "insider" researcher status depending on their social, national, and ethnic commonalities and knowledge of the studied community. The "outsider" label cannot be determined by a single distinguishing marker such as nationality; moreover, scholars have called attention to the fact that the researcher's identity shifts between "insider" and "outsider" during the research process (CARLING et al., 2014; PUSTULKA, BELL & TRĄBKA, 2019). This is because through the conversation and the interview, both the researcher and the interviewee gain information and knowledge about each other and discover that they are more distant or closer than they had thought at initial contact (CHERENI, 2014). [9]

The "insider" position does not automatically translate into easier access to one's interviewees (NOWICKA & RYAN, 2015). HAMILTON (2020) shared her experiences as a Black feminist in a study on Black women regarding attachment parenting. She noted that her interviewees were familiar with "[w]hat I was 'about'" (p.524). However, she encountered difficulty accessing them due to social and class boundaries between herself—an international student and researcher—and her interviewees. A difference in social status between the researcher and the interviewee can create distance, even if the two actors share a "fixed" attribute such as race. GANGA and SCOTT (2006, §30) mentioned that GANGA was not regarded as an "insider" because he was a researcher from a university, despite being Italian like the study participants. Moreover, the association with the university even generated suspicion. Additionally, HOLVINO (2010) reconsidered a conceptual framework of intersections of race, gender, and class identities in feminist organization studies. She reflected on her identities and mentioned her struggles with an ambiguous position toward her workplace and minority groups. As a woman of color in the United States, HOLVINO commented that she felt less powerful in academic research institutions. On the other hand, minority communities would not necessarily consider her to be "one of them" because of her status as an outsider or researcher with a different social status. [10]

Furthermore, scholars have implemented strategic measures for alleviating a potential distance with their interviewees. For example, stemming from feminist interview methods, ENGLAND (1994) coined the term "negotiation of identity" and suggested various strategies that researchers can implement to get closer to their interviewees. They ranged from seeking commonalities to confessing conflicting and sensitive political issues to expressing their honest opinion. Additionally, as a queer mom with a wife, ACOSTA (2019) investigated lesbian, bisexual, and queer stepparent families. She he was personally and professionally aware of their difficulties. Despite being partially an "insider" of the interviewees, she intentionally exposed her family situation beforehand to minimize the potential distance between her and her interviewees. Similarly, an "outsider" positionality can be applied strategically; for example, being an outsider helps a researcher to ask questions about the knowledge and culture of the studied group (BILECEN, 2014) without provoking suspicion among the interviewees. This possibly makes them more open to answering the outsider's questions, as the studied group does not expect "outsider" researchers to have certain knowledge of their community. This is in contrast to "insider" researchers, whom interviewees have certain expectations about regarding knowledge and information. [11]

In a similar vein, SRIVASTAVA (2006) intentionally made herself an "insider" through her outfit. She investigated the schooling practices of families who send their children to "low-fee" private schools in rural and urban regions of Uttar Pradesh, India. Being the child of parents from the Indian diaspora in Canada, she argued that some insider/outsider characteristics are blurred, such as Indian/Canadian, compared with more "solid" characteristics such as caste, gender, and other social labels. Despite partially sharing an "Indian" identity with the interviewees, a risk existed of a distanced relationship with them due to the

researcher–interviewee power hierarchy (IRGIL, 2021; PUSTULKA et al., 2019). To reduce this risk, SRIVASTAVA (2006) wore traditional Indian clothes when she conducted interviews with the parents to reduce the power hierarchy between them. Furthermore, an interviewee can also be the one to hold an "expert" position. OAKLEY (2016) acknowledged the power hierarchy, referring to this relationship as the "gift relationship" (p.209). This hints at the researcher's dependence on narratives and stories and the positions of interviewees as "experts." [12]

Reflecting the fluidity of "insider" and "outsider" identities, setting an intentional distance with the third party can contribute to alleviating the distance between the researcher and the interviewee. CONTI and O'NEIL (2007, p.75) demonstrated that a certain need existed for "identity management" in their research, a technique that helped one of the authors to overcome interviewees' suspicion towards him. Specifically, one of the authors conducted interviews with elite legal professionals, including jurists, working with World Trade Organisation (WTO) legislation (ibid.). The interviewer intentionally sought to distance himself from anti-WTO protestors during one interview because he did not want the interviewees to consider him part of—from their perspective—an outsider group (i.e., anti-WTO protestors). The researcher's goal was for the interviewees to see him as an "insider" who was attempting to build relationships with legal elites (ibid.). [13]

Another strategy for mitigating the distance in the relationship with one's interviewees is to seek commonalities at a specific location. MAY (2014), a member of a minority in his country, shared his experiences of creating rapport with members of the local majority. The author, an African American working as a professor at a U.S. university, interviewed White Americans about the nightlife in their neighborhood. During the interviews, he experienced "shared moments" with the interviewees, as the local nightlife community in which he socialized was similar to that of the White interviewees' community (p.124). Nevertheless, the author reported that the interviewees seemed to avoid discussing the racial issue, which was a distinctive marker between the researcher and his interviewees. Having a locational "sameness," such as the researcher and the interviewee coming from the same alma mater, also contributes to establishing a rapport (CHERENI, 2014, §22). Scholars have acknowledged the fluidity of a researcher's position as "outsider" and "insider" (ERGUN & ERDEMIR, 2010; HAMILTON, 2020). They have also sought to strategically position themselves during interviews through their shifting identities as researchers, natives, locals, and outsiders. [14]

In the current study I conducted—as a native national—interviews with foreigners in Japan. This identity setting risked creating a power hierarchy between the interviewees and me. If a researcher is originally from the host society of the studied migrant population, then he or she will tend to be an "outsider" from the migrants' perspective. This division can also create hierarchies with the minority population residing in the "outsider's" native country. In the context of my study, I could easily have been treated as an "outsider" because my nationality is

Japanese; thus, I could have been regarded as a member of the majority population in the host society from the interviewees' perspective. However, as a migrant in Germany myself, I examined how my identity as a "native national" was carefully managed (CONTI & O'NEIL, 2007). Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I needed to carefully reconsider my positionality as a researcher in online interviews. [15]

2.2 Researcher positionality in online interviews

It is critical to investigate the ambiguous positionality of a researcher in not only face-to-face interviews but also online interview settings. I conducted interviews for this ongoing research in 2021 and 2022 in the midst of COVID-19. The global pandemic response involved various measures that limited many aspects of people's social life as well as the imposition of travel restrictions across the world. Before the pandemic, scholars had already regarded online ethnography as a potential methodological approach in terms of cost-efficiency and convenience (ARCHIBALD, AMBAGTSHEER, CASEY & LAWLESS, 2019). HAVERINEN (2015) presented a brief history of online ethnography, which dates back to the late 1980s and early 1990s. At the time, the main approach to online ethnography centered on an analysis of texts available online. JOHNSON, SCHEITLE and ECKLUND (2021) conducted quantitative research on the quality of in-person, telephone and Skype interviews before the pandemic. Their participants claimed that an in-person interview was the best method among the three options. The authors recommended that researchers mainly use in-person interviews, and that remote interviews should only be used in select cases. [16]

When the pandemic spread across the globe in 2020, scholars had no choice but to rely heavily on online ethnography to conduct research (KIM et al., 2021). Before the pandemic, technical problems were raised as a main source of frustration for interviewees in Zoom interviews (ARCHIBALD et al., 2019). However, SELF (2021) asserted that due to the pandemic, the population grew used to Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology[3] and both interviewees and researchers became more accessible—not only because of a sufficient internet connection but also because of their technological understanding through the prevalence of information and training on VoIP. Similarly, my study participants had been forced to use Zoom in their daily work, and thus had become familiar with the technical problems that occur when using Zoom. When an internet connection became poor during interviews with my Vietnamese professionals, they often suggested that we reconnect to a Zoom room. The interviewees were proficient with Zoom; thus, any technical problems that arose during interviews were not a major impediment due to the diffusion of Zoom and other VoIPs in their daily working lives (ibid.). [17]

This forced shift in ethnographic research methods has attracted much scholarly attention, especially regarding how to conduct online research effectively (e.g., PRZYBYLSKI, 2020) despite the travel and social life restrictions imposed in

3 VoIP technologies are online telecommunication tools, such as "Skype, Whatsapp, Webex and Zoom" (TOMAS & BIDET, 2023, p.1).

response to COVID-19. JOHNSON et al. (2021) acknowledged the limitations of online interviews (e.g., difficulties in creating rapport) and expressed a preference for face-to-face interviews. Other scholars have highlighted the benefits of online interviews, such as them being considerably more cost-efficient because the researcher and interviewee do not have to travel to a physical meeting point (SELF, 2021). Additionally, online methods can be more useful when discussing a sensitive topic. Interviewees perceive online interviews as more secure than offline interviews for discussing personal and intimate topics as the other person is not physically present (RICK, 2023). Similarly, KIM et al. (2021) highlighted that online interviews can help participants to remain in their comfort zone as they are often conducted from the interviewee's private home. Hence, the authors underlined that online interviews are not necessarily the "worst" interview method (ibid.). While researchers have examined the pros and cons of online research methods during the pandemic (RICK, 2023; SELF, 2021), few studies have been conducted on how the researcher–interviewee relationship is shaped and modified in online interviews during periods of uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. [18]

In this article, I present the process of how I sought commonalities with my research participants during online interviews as well as how our relationship shifted. Before I present the methods I used to conduct this research (Section 4), I introduce this study's conceptual framework of "being in the moment" in Section 3. There, I explain how this concept assists in better understanding the researcher's positionality in online interviews by highlighting different temporal and spatial moments between the researcher and the interviewee. [19]

3. Conceptual Framework: "Being in the Moment"

The global pandemic pressured migrants around the world to make critical decisions about their lives as mobile citizens (e.g., XIANG, 2021). The interviewees and I, as migrants, experienced our own fateful moments after the outbreak of COVID-19. For example, I had to modify my research methods due to the pandemic. The interviewees were also affected in a variety of ways, from job changes to the inability to travel back to their home country. In the field of social sciences, GIDDENS (1991) famously coined the term "fateful moment." He explained that "[f]ateful moments are those when individuals are called on to take decisions that are particularly consequential for their ambitions, or more generally for their future lives" (pp.112-113). In the present-day context, the time of the pandemic echoes the concept of the "fateful moment" of GIDDENS. In this section, I develop how the idea of "moments" contributed to more accurately capturing the experiences of online interviews during the pandemic. [20]

Scholars from the fields of social sciences have applied "moments" in discussions of intimate and family relationships in everyday life. GABB and FINK (2015) discussed how the evolution of couples' long-term relationships is contingent on time and moments during their everyday routines. KREMER-SADLIK and PAUGH (2007) argued that the moments of a family's daily routine contribute to and nurture the "quality time" required to establish relationships between family

members. Other scholars contributed to understanding the researcher-interviewee relationship by examining how these "moments" are established. VAN MOL et al. (2013, pp.81-82) stressed the importance of reflecting on moments of "insiderness and outsiderness" during research. As mentioned in the previous section, MAY (2014) conducted ethnographic fieldwork on nightlife in the United States by interviewing White participants. He admitted that the racial differences between himself and his interviewees significantly affected or added to the complexity of his research. Despite the differences between MAY and his interviewees' racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds, he was able to share moments with them based on their common local experiences as well as through the interviews. He argued that these moments

> "are not predicated upon a presumed shared connection stemming from one's racial identity, but rather upon the convergence of the participants' experiences. This convergence occurs across many boundaries—e.g., racial, gender, class, age, or religious boundaries—when the participants in the conversation come upon a topic with which they each have experience and a willingness to discuss" (p.133). [21]

Combining dementia studies with the social scientific field, KEADY et al. (2022, p.687) proposed the concept of "being in the moment." They defined it as "a relational, embodied and multi-sensory human experience. It is both situational and autobiographical and can exist in a fleeting moment or for longer periods of time." Deriving this concept from a pathological term, the authors developed it based on encounters with dementia patients in a health institution. They suggested this concept because one can more accurately reflect oneself in an encounter with dementia patients by considering the possibility that a person with dementia may have a different understanding of time. Describing this encounter as "situational," they did not consider this phenomenon a one-time event but rather added the long-term aspect of a "fleeting moment" (ibid.). Instead of relying solely on the term "moment," the phrase "being in the moment" allows one to reconsider one's experiences over the long term, not just as a single event; moreover, the concept places greater emphasis on the fluid and continuous aspect of the moment. In the context of my study, I focused on Vietnamese IT professionals employed in Japan, and I used KEADY et al.'s concept in my research by focusing on relational and (auto)biographical factors highlighted in their work. At the time of the interviews, all of the interviewees resided and worked in Japan. I used the concept to unravel how the positionality of the researcher shifts through online interviews by sharing the continuous moments of transnational life, particularly during the pandemic. Additionally, the concept's attention to the fluidity and long-term aspects of moments has also been supported by literature on feminist interview methods. Distancing herself from socially constructed labels such as race and gender, VALENTINE (2002) underlined the shifting positionality in the relationship between a researcher and an interviewee during research. The author stated the following:

> "In research encounters, the interviewer and interviewee are not locked into static positions described by the usual co-ordinates of class, race, gender, etc. Rather, the

> way we are positioned in relation to each other is a shifting product of our own fluid performances of the self and the ways that these are read by each other" (p.123). [22]

In the previous section, I demonstrated that scholars modified their research methods to online ones during the COVID-19 pandemic (MUNK & WINTHEREIK, 2022; SELF, 2021). However, not many researchers have studied how to seek commonalities in online interviews and the shift in the researcher-interviewee relationship, particularly during periods of uncertainty such as the pandemic. Therefore, in this study, I explored how the co-creation of positionality in research shifted—or did not shift—in my fieldwork research during the pandemic. I positioned the pandemic not as an unprecedented or unique event that affected how I conducted my research but rather as a guide applicable to other, similarly uncertain events that are occurring and may occur in the future. In the next section, I present the general background of this research project as well as the methods employed for data collection. [23]

4. Research Background and Methods

For this study, I used data from ethnographic fieldwork I conducted as part of an ongoing research project which investigates how Vietnamese IT professionals navigate the labor market between Japan and Vietnam. These IT professionals are an emerging foreign labor population in the IT and engineering sectors in Japan (MURANAKA, 2022). As of 2022, 476,346 Vietnamese nationals resided in Japan; the size of the Vietnamese resident population among foreign nationals in Japan is second only to that of Chinese nationals (ISA, 2023). Furthermore, numerous Vietnamese nationals are employed in various sectors, including the IT sector, which is under pressure from a serious labor shortage. [24]

I used purposive sampling to recruit my interviewees. Scholars apply purposive sampling to choose interviewees who "are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest" (PALINKAS et al., 2015, p.534). In my research project, I investigate how Vietnamese IT professionals navigate the Japanese labor market, as they can provide me with the knowledge on their migration experiences. The interviewees were recruited through various social network services (SNSs; 28 interviewees), snowball sampling (two interviewees) (NOY, 2008), and my personal connections (four interviewees). The main SNSs I used for recruitment were Facebook and LinkedIn,[4] since members of the target population are typically active on at least one of those two services. On LinkedIn, I used the search option to identify potential interviewees, using search terms such as "engineer," "IT," and "information and communication" in three different languages (Japanese, English, and Vietnamese). I also filtered the search results to include only those currently employed in Japan. I sent over 150 interview invitations to individuals I identified in the search results. Of the 34 interviewees who responded, 21 were contacted through LinkedIn. [25]

4 I have had a LinkedIn account for a couple of years. I created it to look for jobs rather than for research purposes. Consequently, my official academic and professional information is available there.

Considering that the target interviewees were IT professionals who predominantly perform their jobs online, the data collection method was unlikely to exclude a large proportion of the population from the study. However, I am also aware that solely relying on SNSs to look for interviewees excluded certain population groups such as Vietnamese IT professionals who did not have access to the Internet or use LinkedIn or Facebook. To avoid this bias in the data, I also used snowball sampling to find additional potential interviewees. This technique allows one to reach a specific population—in this case, Vietnamese IT professionals—and I recruited two interviewees using this method. I also found four interviewees through my personal networks. In total, I recruited six interviewees from outside of SNSs. [26]

I conducted semi-structured interviews (GALLETTA, 2013) in both offline and online settings between 2021 and 2022. I opted for this method not only because it provided a certain structure for studying the targeted interviewees but also because it allows a researcher to explore further topics depending on a participant's answer. This flexibility in the interview structure is necessary for capturing the narratives of interviewees which are crucial in accessing people's experiences (PERÄKYLÄ, 2005). This is in contrast to a structured interview (FONTANA & FREY, 2000), which risks receiving limited categories of responses. In total, 34 Vietnamese IT professionals (18 men and 16 women aged 23-45 years) who resided in Japan participated in the interviews. Out of the 34 interviewees, 29 opted for online video interviews. All of the interviewees possessed intermediate or advanced Japanese language proficiency or English, or both. All but two of the participants had earned at least a BA degree, with 16 having completed a degree in Japan, while the other two had completed vocational schools in Japan. As neither Japanese nor English was the interviewees' mother tongue, I prepared all of the interview questions in plain and simple language (see the Appendix). With the interviewees' consent, the interviews were recorded and transcribed; for interviewees who did not agree to be recorded, I asked for their consent to take notes during their interview, which they all agreed to. The interviewees were ensured confidentiality, and all of the names used in this article are pseudonyms. I present my findings and analysis in the following two sections. [27]

5. Findings: Sharing Moments in Online Interviews

5.1 Mutual background checks as a way to "be in the moment"

One advantage of online interviews is that they offer both the interviewer and the interviewee easier access to the other's individual (professional) moments prior to the interview. ACOSTA (2019, p.34) explained her "preemptive steps," in which she intentionally expanded her online presence by making and updating her life and professional works visible on SNSs to decrease the distance with her potential interviewees. Similarly, in my study, both the interviewer and interviewee were able to perform a background check to review the professional and autobiographical moments in each other's lives. This alleviated the potential power hierarchy between us, as the first contact was initiated through online

platforms. For instance, compared with the previous research project I conducted before the pandemic, I was able to access considerably more interviewees through LinkedIn.[5] [28]

The interviewer and interviewee seeking commonalities is necessary for diminishing the potential distance in their relationship (ACOSTA, 2019; LEUNG, 2015). A useful example is that my interviewee, Tam, indicated that he conducted a background check on me on LinkedIn before our interview. He had worked in Japan since 2017 as an engineer. Tiring of the slow pace of salary increases and realizing that he could not develop his skills and accumulate work experience as quickly as he wanted, Tam left his job at a traditional Japanese IT firm for an international firm in Japan. At the beginning of the interview, before I introduced myself, he mentioned his goal of working in the country where I work (i.e., Germany). His knowledge of my main country of residence was obviously obtained from the background check he conducted via my LinkedIn profile which contains my professional and academic information. Indeed, even before the rise of online fieldwork, a potential interviewee could easily "Google" interviewers beforehand to review their profile on SNSs. However, the theme of mutual online background checks had not been mentioned during interviews in my previous project. By contrast, the interviewees in the current project mentioned Germany[6] —my main place of residence—as a country with developed IT and engineering fields, and they expressed an interest in going there. [29]

In contrast to seeking commonalities, reviewing my background likely also made some interviewees feel that they were more knowledgeable about certain topics than I was. In other words, such a background check allows for the alleviation of a stereotypical power dynamic between the researcher and interviewee. Unlike the Vietnamese IT professionals in this study, I do not have experience as a *sei-shain* [full-time worker] in Japan, and my LinkedIn profile clearly indicates this. Whether the interviewees knew this or not was a different question, but some explained to me how Japan's new institutionalized *shūshoku katsudō* [job-hunting] system works. For example, one stated the following: "[Y]ou may or may not know, but the new graduate recruitment system in Japan requires a lot of preparation." This comment hinted that they felt they were in a more "knowledgeable" position than I was. Furthermore, such background checks helped to alleviate the hierarchical relationship between me as a Japanese citizen and the Vietnamese interviewees residing in Japan as a minority. Their understanding of my limited knowledge of the recruitment system greatly assisted in deconstructing an imagined dichotomy or potential hierarchy between them and me. [30]

This practice of mutual background checks facilitates the sharing of each party's biographical information to dim the potential distance in relationships and allows commonalities to be found. Furthermore, "being in the moment" can be both a "situational and autobiographical" (KEADY et al., 2022, p.687) experience, and

5 One interviewee in the previous project compared with 21 in the current project.

6 They talked about Germany when they discussed their preferred destination country before going to Japan or their future destination country.

background checking allows the two parties to "be in the (same) moment" in terms of each other's knowledge of autobiographical and professional background information. Additionally, checking each other's information was not limited to a singular interview event but was rather a process of sharing moments before and during the online interviews. This process prevented and alleviated the potential for stereotypical researcher-interviewee power dynamics. [31]

5.2 Advantages of sharing moments during online video interviews

Difficulties in creating rapport are often raised as a disadvantage of the online interview setting (ARCHIBALD et al., 2019). However, for discussing some sensitive topics, interviewees prefer Zoom or online interviews to in-person interviews (SELF, 2021), as online interviews provide a more relaxed interview environment. WELLER (2017) highlighted the "pressure of presence" during offline interviews. She detailed an interview she conducted at a university where the interviewee had to sit face-to-face with her, the interviewer, across a table. This physical presence of the counterpart creates a sense of pressure for some interviewees. Moreover, SELF (2021) discussed how a lack of physical presence can facilitate a talkative atmosphere during an interview: the VoIP interview mode (referring to a telephone or teleconference tool turning off its video) indeed creates a certain degree of distance between the interviewer and interviewee, which allows the interviewer to ask sensitive questions as a "faceless" researcher (§17). From the interviewee's perspective, the interview happens online, and they can discuss sensitive topics while in a secure environment such as their home (§29). Based on my list of questions (see the Appendix), some sensitive answers were expected—including those concerning experiences of discrimination—and the interviewees might have preferred to discuss them in a private sphere rather than openly in public. Among the online interviews in my sample, all interviewees except one were sitting in a private room or their house when we had the interview. The exception was Phi, who asked me to schedule our interview at 8:00 PM. Once it began, she explained to me that she was still at her workplace. "Nobody is here at this time," she told me, and there seemingly were no others or the public present. [32]

As previously mentioned, COVID-19 forced researchers to rely on online interviews, and people also became familiar with such tools (SELF, 2021). The absence of others in the online interview venue was unexpectedly achieved due to pandemic-related regulations. When I conducted my fieldwork in 2022, Japan was under a quasi-state of emergency, and *mokushoku*—or "silent eating"—was strongly encouraged nationwide. Although going to food service establishments was permissible at the time, the authorities strongly discouraged discussions between people in such establishments, which I had used to conduct face-to-face interviews before the pandemic. Conducting interviews in these venues may have put pressure on the interviewees not to speak too much or engage in open discussion. It is unclear whether this possible pressure of presence created by other people in a food service establishment influenced the interviewees, but of my 34 interviewees—all of whom were offered either an in-person or online interview—30 opted for an online interview. Nevertheless, those who chose an

online interview often added an explanation in their written reply, such as that of Trang, who sent the following by Facebook Messenger: "Because we're under COVID-19 and there is *mokushoku* rule, let's see each other online, it's easier to talk." Referring to the "silent eating" rule, Trang hinted that the online interview environment was the preferred mode for conversing freely. Similarly, Huyen hinted at how prevalent online telecommunication had become during the pandemic; she had been working for an IT firm in Japan and, as soon as the interview began over Zoom, she said the following: "*Yono naka mo onrain ni narete kimashita shi* [Nowadays, the world in general got used to working online, you know]." She was clearly referring to the expansion of digital telecommunication in people's daily lives following the outbreak of COVID-19. [33]

Since most of the online interviews were conducted in the evening after work or on the weekend, I was able to observe some moments of the interviewees' personal lives. Phi, who was still at the office by herself, indicated that she was in a "personal" space at her workplace. One extreme example arose during my interview with My as I interviewed her in the evening after her hectic workday. As she was divorced and raising two adolescents in Japan, she had to juggle caring for her children and working full-time without consistent help from her relatives. During the interview, My suddenly asked me while chuckling, "Is it OK if I lay on the bed because of my backache? My age is catching up with me; my back hurts." We conducted the remaining 30 minutes of the interview while she lay on her bed. After lying down, she appeared more relaxed on the video feed, apparently because her back pain had been alleviated. This shift in her demeanor may not have occurred if this interview had taken place in a public space. [34]

Although the online interviews provided a certain level of comfort for the interviewees (e.g., Phi and My above), they admittedly made it more difficult to have informal or casual conversations since the interviewees sometimes left the Zoom meeting room soon after the recording stopped. After I finished asking all of my questions, I told the interviewees that I would stop recording. Technologically speaking, it is possible to continue conversing even once the recording has stopped. However, some interviewees considered the end of recording to be the end of the interview. My interview with Dinh ended abruptly at this point. Once I told him that I had stopped the recording, he suddenly said "Is that all? Then OK, I have to go, good luck for your research!" Without giving me any time to reply, he left the Zoom room. If this interview had happened offline, it would not have finished in such a rushed manner. For instance, of my five offline interviews, the conversations lasted an average of 20 minutes even when I stopped recording. The post-recording conversation was the most pronounced with Duy, who talked for over 40 minutes after I stopped recording; eventually, we walked to the closest station together after we left the café where the interview was conducted.[7] He mentioned that he was on his way for a drink to catch up with his Japanese colleagues, and our conversation converged on the topic of his friendship and social relationships in Japan. Similar to my interview with Duy, for other in-person interviews, I experienced a moment of informal conversation with

7 This interview was conducted after the *mokushoku* rule had been relaxed. It was one of the first interviews I conducted face-to-face after the outbreak of the pandemic.

the interviewees even after I stopped recording. This was because we were physically in the same location, and it was easier to have a casual conversation after the official interview. However, in each Zoom interview, once I clicked the "end meeting" button, the meeting was terminated immediately. Thus, the virtual "shared moment" between myself and the interviewee suddenly came to an end, which was also observed in some of the online interviews I conducted in 2022. [35]

In sum, despite the online research setting, the interviewees and I were able to "be in the moment" by sharing our autobiographical and professional backgrounds through SNSs before the interviews occurred. Nevertheless, I acknowledge the constraints of the online interview method, which scholars have noted in numerous works (JOHNSON et al., 2021; PRZYBYLSKI, 2020). It is crucial to highlight that the lives of both parties were transformed by the various pandemic-related restrictions. Under the *mokushoku* rule in Japan, people were discouraged from conversing in cafés or restaurants, so the reliance on online platforms notably allowed for relaxed environments to be created. For example, interviewees participated in the interview from home or a private room (e.g., Trang and Dinh), including one extreme example of My or the workplace in the absence of employees (i.e., Phi). In the next section, I analyse how positionality was co-created in the online setting by the researcher and the interviewees, who shared the common moment of being migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. [36]

6. Findings: Sharing the Moment of Being a Migrant in a Foreign Country During COVID-19

Among my interviewees, a common practice appeared to be that they performed a background check on me. Despite recognizing me as a Japanese person,[8] their reactions or answers to my questions hinted that they regarded me, at least in some sense, as just someone based in Germany. For example, when I mentioned to Hung that I live in Germany, he suddenly confessed the following: "Ah, actually I thought once about applying for a MA program in Germany in which my field is quite strong." Additionally, it became clear that the interviewees viewed me as a person from outside of Japan while they were describing their jobs. For example, Tam said the following: "I'm working on a project related to SAP Software, you are very much familiar with it, right?" SAP Software is a German multinational financial/business management software company, and the interviewee assumed that I, as a person based in Germany, knew about the software. These quotes demonstrate a shift in my identity from a Japanese national to a person living in Germany based on the information the interviewees had gleaned through their background checks. [37]

Seeking commonalities is not the only means of relieving power dynamics. Some interviewees regarded me as an "outsider" in relation to Japanese society after checking my background. In other words, they appeared to regard me as a person who had left home and become a stranger (AHMED, 1999, p.336). This tendency was observed in a conversation regarding one interviewee's working life

8 The interviewees seemed to recognize me as a Japanese person from my name.

in Japan: Hiep had finished his BA and MA at a Japanese private university; after completing his degrees, he decided to look for a job through an institutionalized *shūshoku katsudō* [job-hunting] system, through which new graduates in Japan look for a regular lifetime job in a firm. This recruitment activity generally begins in the third year of university and includes a visit to potential employers, the passing of entrance exams, and consecutive (group) interviews (KOSUGI, 2007). Sharing this experience during the interview, Hiep stated the following: "I'm not sure you know, but we start the job-hunting early [in the third year], and it's really tiring." He would not have said this unless he had known in advance of my lack of work experience in Japan through my LinkedIn profile. [38]

In a similar vein, Mai was also hired through this recruitment system and, during her interview, she complained to me about the slow career progression in Japanese firms. This is a common complaint about the Japanese corporate system raised by foreign professionals (D'COSTA, 2015). Regarding this Japanese business practice, she began by stating the following: "I'm not sure you know, but in Japan, it takes time to get promoted." These quotes by Hiep and Mai were not exceptions, as I heard similar expressions from other interviewees. As they hinted at their uncertainty towards my knowledge of Japanese firms or businesses, they may have seen me as an "outsider" in relation to Japanese firms' customs. [39]

Noteworthily, sharing common characteristics does not automatically facilitate the establishment of a closer interviewer–interviewee relationship. However, I observed several moments where my study participants recognized a situational commonality, such as when I discussed life during COVID-19 in Germany and travel restrictions. All of the interviewees were living and working in Japan at the time of the interviews, and they discussed both the positive and negative effects of COVID-19 on their lives. For instance, Nghia acknowledged mixed feelings regarding what COVID-19 had brought to her life as a "being a foreigner in Japan" moment:

> "[O]f course, like we are talking now, with these technological tools, I can contact regularly with my family via FaceTime and Messenger, but going back to Vietnam was ... almost [the] only major issue during COVID-19 that ... heavily influenced my life … Like when I was thinking about going out [of Japan] ... I imagined that ... I would not be able to re-enter Japan, and these kinds of thing[s]. You know this, right?" [40]

Other interviewees also shared this sentiment. Highlighting our interview setting as a common practice of working from home, they also expressed the concern that they did not know when they would be able to visit Vietnam again. The last sentence of Nghia's interview excerpt above is an example of how the interviewees saw me as someone who was sharing certain moments of being a foreigner with them, particularly in terms of us working digitally and living as foreigners during the pandemic. [41]

Moreover, this commonality of "being a foreigner" was emphasized by questions from my interviewees. RYAN (2015) discussed how, as an Irish woman in London, she was able to seek some level of commonality with one of her study participants, a Polish migrant in London, by sharing their migrant status. In the context of my study, the influence of COVID-19 added to the life of migrants, and the interviewees often brought up issues related to "being a foreigner" during the pandemic. After I asked about the effects of COVID-19 on their lives in general, not only Nghai but also Lan and other interviewees asked me how often I was in regular contact with my family in Japan and how often I was able to return there after the outbreak of the pandemic. Perceiving me as a person who lived abroad like they do, these interviewees were concerned about my transnational family issues. Such questions also underlined how the interviewees regarded me as a foreigner in the moment of the pandemic. [42]

As online interviews could hinder the establishment of rapport with interviewees (JOHNSON et al., 2021), researchers are required to pay particular attention to how to alleviate the power dynamics between them and their study participants (OAKLEY, 1981). Therefore, deviating from the "traditional" hierarchical researcher-interviewee relationship was crucial for my online interviews, and it was partially facilitated through the prevalence of the interviewees' background checks on me. Moreover, they regarded me as someone in Germany and who was outside of Japanese corporate culture. This contributed to relieving the traditional researcher-interviewee power dynamics, as the interviewees "instructed" me in how Japanese company culture functions. Furthermore, I constantly sought commonalities with my interviewees. We were both working remotely in a foreign country, and this online research contributed to us sharing a certain degree of commonality—namely "being in the moment" of working remotely as a foreigner during the pandemic. In addition, exchanges with Lan and other interviewees highlighted the influence of travel restrictions as a foreigner. Based on KEADY et al.'s (2022, p.687) concept of "being in the moment," the findings presented in this section have highlighted that the online interview method facilitated the sharing of some personal and professional background as well as assisted in alleviating the power dynamics through "being in the moment" of COVID-19 as a foreigner. The following section discusses the findings and concludes the study. [43]

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Lan had said "*Onaji-desune*! [It's the same for me!]," and she repeated a similar phrase when she discovered that I am from a city in the north of Japan, where she had learned Japanese. Having a shared experience in that city was a practical foundation upon which we could discuss the location, and this locational commonality facilitated the further development of our conversation during our online interview. As Lan and I were both female foreign workers, we shared some similarities in our social labels—including gender and foreign status—as well as locational commonalities and shared life experiences of living as a foreigner during the pandemic. In other words, according to the concept of KEADY et al., we were able to "be in the moment" by sharing biographical backgrounds and experiences as foreigners during the pandemic. [44]

Drawn from works on feminist research methods (e.g., ACOSTA, 2019; WRAY & BARTHOLOMEW, 2010), I explored how the relationship between my positionality as a researcher toward the study participants shifted during the online interviews. I should emphasize that in this investigation, my positionality required careful consideration, given that I am a Japanese national and thus a member of the majority population of the country in which the interviewed Vietnamese nationals were living at the moment of their interviews. Without caution, the interviews may have easily slipped into the traditional power dynamics of the researcher holding the power, of which studies on feminist interview methods have already warned in various studies (e.g., ACOSTA, 2019; OAKLEY, 1981). The feminist interview perspective has been employed to cautiously explore how the different social labels—race, gender, and professional status—and the differences in knowledge and experiences produce power dynamics between researcher and interviewee (COUSIN, 2010; WRAY & BARTHOLOMEW, 2010). This underlines the reflexivity toward the relationship of the researcher with the interviewee (ALABI, 2023; HAMILTON, 2020). To alleviate these power dynamics, feminist researchers such as ACOSTA (2019) have recalled the importance of performing background checks prior to an interview. Moreover, CARLING et al. (2014) warned of the danger of the binary insider/outsider division, noting that the researcher-interviewee relationship can be rather fluid as it is created and shifts throughout the course of the research. [45]

COVID-19 forced researchers to adapt to restrictions in life, and one major shift was the sudden prevalence of the use of online meeting tools. Recent studies conducted since the outbreak of the pandemic have presented both advantages and disadvantages of online interviews (e.g., RICK, 2023; SELF, 2021). Online interviews are said to inhibit the creation of rapport, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviewees were also accustomed to using online telecommunication tools at their workplace (SELF, 2021). In this study, I investigated how my positionality toward my study participants shifted and was reshaped during the online interviews. I used KEADY et al.'s (2022) concept of "being in the moment" to unravel how the interviewees and I were able to seek commonalities by sharing professional and personal background moments. [46]

Drawn from online interview data with Vietnamese IT professionals in Japan, the main findings of this study are as follows: First, the prevalence of online platforms provided both me and the interviewees with a mutual opportunity to review each other's professional and biographical moments beforehand through our LinkedIn profiles. These online platforms were already available prior to the pandemic; however, compared with my previous research, this practice of background checking was more common among the interviewees, and it assisted us with "being in the moment." By this, I mean sharing information on each other's experiences and background before the interviews. For instance, the interviewees were aware that I, although a Japanese national, did not necessarily have work experience in Japan, and thus, they were more knowledgeable about the Japanese working environment than I was. [47]

The online interviews helped me not only to accommodate Japan's COVID-related regulations but also to conduct the interviews in a more relaxed and personal environment. Moreover, both I and the Vietnamese IT professionals shared experiences of being a foreigner during COVID-19 while having family and relatives outside of our country of residence. As foreigners who endured the pandemic and were forced to maintain transnational relationships, the intersections in our moments of being foreigners during the pandemic provided us with an opportunity to seek commonalities during the interviews, which allowed me to alleviate and negotiate the traditional researcher-interviewee power dynamics. However, online interviews do not only bring advantages—they can also hinder the creation of rapport (JOHNSON et al., 2021). I experienced this first-hand when some of my online interviews ended suddenly once the Zoom meeting room was closed. Nevertheless, I argue that the findings of this study demonstrate that online interviews and research provide certain advantages (SELF, 2021) in co-building relationships between the researcher and the study participants through being in (similar) moments. Thus, one should not take a simplistic, binary view of the power dynamics between the researcher and the interviewee. [48]

In addition, the researcher-interviewee relationship is not static but rather shifts during the interview process, even in an online setting. A potential hierarchical or distanced relationship can be alleviated by sharing autobiographical background information through mutual background checking via SNSs and sharing the situational commonality of living as a foreigner during the pandemic. The concept of "being in the moment" by KEADY et al. (2022) emphasizes the sharing of human experiences as relational, situational, and autobiographical dimensions, not as a singular event. Following this concept, I argue that the online interviews allowed commonalities to be sought before and through the online interview process, despite some differences in background and knowledge on certain issues. Furthermore, based on these findings, one should not limit "being in the moment" to this specific pandemic. Instead, it is necessary to consider how to conduct research amidst other uncertainties and obstacles that could halt and disrupt the lives of international migrants and researchers. Thus, scholars should instead take these findings as a starting point to reflect on how to take uncertainties—not just pandemic-related ones but also those that arise from

conflicts and natural disasters—into consideration in developing research methods. [49]

In my study I offered several contributions: First, the process of seeking commonalities on an online platform has been under-researched, and I have shed light on it by combining the feminist literature and online interview methods with the concept of "being in the moment." Scholars from the field of feminist interview methods have emphasized the importance of examining researcher-participant power dynamics, while studies on research methods have underlined how online interviews create a different relationship between interviewer and interviewee. Prior to this study, the concept of "being in the moment" had only been used in pathological and dementia studies, often within a health institution (KEADY et al., 2022). I applied this concept to illustrate how a researcher can progressively seek out common biographical and socio-political moments with an interviewee during an online interview. Moreover, background checking through SNSs can be a methodologically useful tool for a researcher to apply to seek commonalities with an interviewee in preparation for and during an interview. The widespread or even mandatory use of online research methods was observed following the outbreak of the global pandemic; however, scholars have encountered various difficulties in establishing rapport with interviewees in online settings (JOHNSON et al., 2021). Nevertheless, depending on the features of the SNS in question, I suggest that interviewers can profit from profile checking as a strategy for seeking commonalities with their interviewees, as they too have been "forced" to become familiar with these technological tools. [50]

Two limitations of this research must be noted. First, it heavily relied on a single SNS to recruit study participants. While the use of LinkedIn was prevalent among my interviewees, solely relying on a single platform may have excluded professionals who were not registered on this SNS. Second, the Vietnamese IT professionals in this study all resided and worked in Japan. My study sample did not include people who had left Japan and returned to Vietnam during the pandemic—one of the population groups most affected by COVID-19. Future studies should seek more heterogeneity by including Vietnamese workers whose migratory processes were heavily influenced by COVID-19. [51]

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Appendix: List of Questions for Interviewees

Introductory questions

Tell me a little bit about yourself.

Before migration

What were you doing before coming to Japan?

Why did you come to Japan?

Education experiences

Please describe what kind of education you received after your high school degree?

Please describe your work experiences during your study.

Current situation (at work)

How is it working abroad in Japan?

What do you do professionally?

What kind of position do you have in your current company? Is there a shift?

What kind of tasks do you do at your current company? Is there a shift?

With whom do you work during your working hours? (Any change in working style due to COVID-19?)

What does a usual week look like for you?

How did you cope with the challenges? What were the strategies?

How did you see yourself in the company when in a team or compared to other employees (foreign/locals)?

How do you see your career progression in the company?

Social life

Do you feel like this is your "home" now?

What kind of people do you socialize with?

COVID question

How has COVID affected your life as a migrant? Or your job?

Future plans and suggestions

Do you have any plans to return to your home country or go somewhere else? Do you want to retire in this country, move elsewhere, or go back home?

Where do you see yourself in 5-10 years?

How do you feel about being a *gaikoku-jin* [foreigner] in Japan?

Concluding interview

What advice would you offer your Vietnamese peers who want to come to Japan?

If you could provide any advice to the Japanese national or local government, what kind of advice would you give …

- in terms of migration policy?
- in terms of other issues?

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