

Social Media as Means of Mitigation of Marginalization for Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Thailand

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1. Introduction

In April 2020, during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in Thailand, in which the country found itself under a national lockdown with a nightly curfew, I received a message via Facebook messenger from a young Vietnamese migrant worker residing in the northeast of Thailand. In the message, he told me that his wife had delivered a baby just a few days before. They were forced to have the baby in Thailand because the enforced lockdown had prevented them from returning to Vietnam. Unfortunately, the baby which was born premature had respiratory issues and had to be rushed to the intensive care unit of the central hospital in Udon Thani Province. As a foreigner residing in Thailand under a tourist visa, the hospital fee for the first two days alone nearly equaled to what he could make working as an undocumented worker in Thailand in a year. The fact that foreigners were charged a different rate than Thai citizens was the primary reason for this excessively high hospital bill.

In his situation, there was no possible way that he could pay for the expenses, and he desperately needed help. He asked me if I could use my Facebook fan page, which is widely followed by the Vietnamese migrant worker community in Thailand to ask for assistance on his behalf. After investigating further details of his dire situation, I decided to make a post on his behalf asking for help from fellow Vietnamese living and working in Thailand. In addition, I contacted some Thai people whom I knew in Udon Thani province to approach the administrators of the hospital, asking for discounts for the unfortunate couple. From these two efforts, the parents of the newborn were able to pay for the hospital fees having received enough donations from people who saw my post on social media and also discount from the hospital leadership who were willing to significantly reduce the treatment fees.

The episode recounted above illustrates one of the many ways that undocumented Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand (UVMWs), the majority of whom range in age between 16-30, use social media in order to deal with and mitigate the experience of marginalization and hardship during time of crisis well as in their everyday life. It also demonstrates how an individual like myself who accompanies this community rely on social media to support them in an ongoing basis, but especially during time of crisis. The account given above also illustrates how sending and receiving information through social media, especially Facebook and its Messenger application has become an indispensable part of the life of UVMWs in Thailand. Social media, however, goes beyond simply being a channel of communication for these young workers. The above account also highlights the empowering role of social media in helping UVMWs in Thailand

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to cope with crisis and marginalization in a country where their presence is not welcomed, at least from a legal perspective if not a social one.

In this paper, I will discuss how social media has been essential in mitigating the ongoing experience of marginalization and coping with crisis, in particular the Covid-19 pandemic ravaging the world. I will demonstrate how mutual support is often sought and given via social media to compensate for the lack of official channels of support. In addition, I will also discuss some of the negative aspects of the role of social media in the lives of UVMWs that need to be addressed by religious and social leaders. Because of the prominent role – both positive and negative – of social media in the lives of UVMWs, those who consider spiritual and social support work with migrant workers must take advantage of social media in order to respond more fully to their needs. This discussion is presented from the perspective of someone who has been involved in support work for this community for 14 years, a large part of which takes place in the online arena. What is demonstrated in this study is that social media, when employed intentionally and prudently, can help compensate for significant social, legal, emotional, and material limitations faced by migrant communities due to their disadvantaged status. At the same time, measures must be taken in order to help young UVMWs better make use of social media to enhance their lives rather than suffering the consequences of misusing digital information technology.

2. Factors Contributing to the Vietnamese Presence in Thailand

Globalization has caused unprecedented levels of migration throughout the world and will continue to do so in complex ways. Vietnamese are not exceptions to this trend, especially with Vietnam's population presently reaching nearly 100 million, making it the 15th most populous country in the world. At the same time, nearly one million Vietnamese enter into the workforce annually making the need for creating jobs an urgent matter for the government.² In the last two decades, the Vietnamese government's policy of encouraging export workers has resulted in large numbers of Vietnamese leaving the country each year to seek employment in other countries. A report prepared by the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry indicates that in 2011, there were over 500,000 Vietnamese nationals working in over 40 countries and territories around the world.³ By 2013, the total number had reached approximately 600,000.⁴ In 2017 alone, 134,751 Vietnamese went to work abroad.⁵ In 2018, nearly 143,000 Vietnamese went abroad as export workers, mostly to the countries of Japan, Taiwan and Korea.⁶ In 2019, this number was 134,482 with Japan receiving over 80,000 Vietnamese workers while Taiwan was the destination for 54,480 workers.⁷ According to the Vietnamese government, there are presently nearly 230,000 Vietnamese working

² “Thực trạng lực lượng lao động Việt Nam và một số vấn đề đặt ra,” Tạp Chí Tài Chính (9 February 2019), <http://tapchitaichinh.vn/nghien-cuu-trao-doi/thuc-trang-luc-luong-lao-dong-viet-nam-va-mot-so-van-de-dat-ra-302133.html>

³ Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Report on the Situation of Vietnamese Overseas Workers* (Báo cáo tổng quan về tình hình di cư của công dân Việt Nam ra nước ngoài), (Hà Nội: Cty ADN, 2011), 917.

⁴ Viet Nhan Luc, *Xuat Khau Lao Dong Viet Nam Ra Nuoc Ngoai*, <http://vietnhanluc.com/xuat-khau-lao-dong-viet-nam-ra-nuoc-ngoai>.

⁵ “Nâng cao chất lượng lao động xuất khẩu,” Bộ Lao Động – Thương Binh – Xã Hội (1 January 2019), <http://www.molisa.gov.vn/Pages/tintuc/chitiet.aspx?tintucID=219367>

⁶ VOV News, “Năm 2018: Lao động Việt Nam đi xuất khẩu nhiều nhất ở nước nào?” (4 January 2019), <https://vov.vn/tin-24h/nam-2018-lao-dong-viet-nam-di-xuat-khau-nhieu-nhat-o-nuoc-nao-859599.vov>.

⁷ “Japan, Taiwan dominate Vietnamese labor imports in 2019,” Thời Đại (3 January 2020), <https://vietnamtimes.org.vn/japan-taiwan-dominate-vietnamese-labor-imports-in-2019-17486.html>

in Taiwan and nearly 50,000 working in Korea.⁸ Vietnamese workers constitute the fastest growing group in Japan, the majority of whom enter the country as part of a technical trainee program set up by the Japanese government to supply the country with blue-collar workers.⁹ Presently, there are 412,000 Vietnamese living in Japan, the vast majority of whom are workers. Vietnamese constitute the third largest foreign group in Japan after Chinese and Koreans.¹⁰ The sending of Vietnamese to work in other countries has had a positive impact for the country's economy. In the years 2017, 2018, and 2019, overseas workers sent home a total of USD13.8 billion, USD15.9 billion, and USD16.7 billion, respectively,¹¹ making up a sizable contribution to the country's annual GDP (USD269.92 billion in 2019).¹²

Official statistics, however, do not convey the whole picture because there are many more who go abroad to work on student or tourist visas. This is often found in the case of Vietnamese going to Australia, the United States, Singapore and South Korea, and it is almost always the case when it comes to Thailand. There are other more dangerous means which Vietnamese resort to in order to go abroad as well. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Council, about 18,000 Vietnamese are smuggled into Europe each year through human trafficking networks.¹³ The incident of 39 young Vietnamese who died in a refrigerated truck in the U.K. while being smuggled into the country in 2019 highlighted the plight of thousands of Vietnamese willing to submit themselves to truly dangerous means to go make a living abroad.¹⁴ Despite the fact that countries such as the United States, Great Britain, Japan, and South Korea are high on the list of countries that Vietnamese desire to go in order to obtain a better financial future for themselves and their families, they are not so accessible to the average Vietnamese worker. Thus, many have to settle for less difficult receiving countries such as Taiwan, Malaysia, Laos and Thailand in Asia, or Libya and Angola in Africa.

The vast majority UVMWs in Thailand are undocumented. Before the coronavirus pandemic forced border closures between Thailand and neighboring countries, each day, numerous buses carry the Vietnamese from their home provinces into Laos or Cambodia, then onward to the various cities and provinces in Thailand. Although there is no official figure of the number of UVMWs in Thailand, it is believed that the total is up to tens of thousands.¹⁵ In reality, the real

⁸ "South Korea and Taiwan have decided to renew visas for foreign workers including Vietnamese to fill a labor shortage amid the coronavirus outbreak," Mekong Immigration Network (7 May 2020), <http://www.mekongmigration.org/?p=8500>

⁹ "Japan considering re-opening door to some foreigners: media," Reuters (1 June 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-japan-travel/japan-considering-re-opening-door-to-some-foreigners-media-idUSKBN238145>

¹⁰ "Vietnamese community in Japan reached almost 412,00," Thời Đại (29 March 2020), <https://vietnamtimes.org.vn/vietnamese-community-in-japan-reached-almost-412000-18873.html#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20Vietnamese%20in,and%20the%20Republic%20of%20Korea>.

¹¹ Giang Le, 16,7 tỉ USD kiều hối về Việt Nam năm 2019, cao gấp 10 lần thu nhập của các hộ gia đình," Forbes Vietnam (17 December 2019), <https://forbesvietnam.com.vn/tin-cap-nhat/167-ti-usd-kieu-hoi-ve-viet-nam-nam-2019-cao-gap-10-lan-thu-nhap-cua-cac-ho-gia-dinh-8552.html>

¹² "Vietnam GDP," Trading Economics, <https://tradingeconomics.com/vietnam/gdp>

¹³ "People smuggling from Vietnam to Europe: The facts," Infomigrants (28 October 2019), <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/20423/people-smuggling-from-vietnam-to-europe-the-facts#:~:text=Human%20trafficking%20networks%20are%20smuggling,Nations%20Economic%20and%20Social%20Council>.

¹⁴ "39 Vietnamese Died in a U.K. Truck. 18,000 More Endure This Perilous Trip," The New York Times (1 November 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/01/world/europe/vietnamese-migrants-europe.html>

¹⁵ "Vietnamese workers in Thailand: lesser known but valuable labour source," Bangkok Post (21 July 2016), <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/1040741/vietnamese-workers-in-thailand-lesser-known-but-valuable->

number constantly changes depending on various factors, such as the state of the Thai economy or the time of year it is. A great number of Vietnamese workers make the trip back to Vietnam on the occasion of the Lunar New Year (Tết) in order to celebrate with the family. The number of Vietnamese in Thailand also depends on whether there is an active campaign by the government to sweep out illegal foreign workers. The reasons for why Vietnamese choose to come to Thailand has to do with the situation in their home country as well as qualities present in the receiving country. According the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs report, sending Vietnamese nationals to work overseas is an important and active policy of the Vietnamese government because it has not been able to satisfy the demand for employment internally.¹⁶ The majority of UVMWs are low-skilled and come from the countryside. Creating jobs for all of them is a challenge that is difficult to overcome. Although the rate of growth of the Vietnamese economy has outpaced Thailand in recent years, the overall economic development in Thailand remains years ahead of Vietnam. The per capita GDP of Thailand in 2018 was three times that of Vietnam.¹⁷ While Vietnamese from throughout the country go overseas to find employment, those who come to Thailand hail from only a limited number of provinces, mostly in the northern half of Vietnam, namely the provinces of Quang Binh, Ha Tinh, Nghe An, Thanh Hoa, Phu Tho, and Hoa Binh. Among these, the vast majority come from the two provinces of Ha Tinh and Nghe An. The economic situation in these provinces tend to fare not as well as that of other parts of the country.

Having considered some of the factors stemming from the home country, one cannot overlook the main reasons that make Thailand a desired destination for UVMWs. Thailand has one of the strongest economies in the region with per capita GDP in 2019 ranking 4th among ASEAN region, 3 places ahead of Vietnam. Even though the economy of Thailand is more developed than that of Vietnam, Thailand is facing a shortage of labor, especially in the low skilled sector. Due to the increase in personal income as well as education and specialized skills in the Thai population, the number of low skilled laborers has decreased. It is increasingly difficult for employers to find local workers for jobs in which requires heavy labor with low pay, little stability, and less than desirable working conditions.¹⁸ The situation is exasperated by the reality of Thai society becoming increasingly aged. According to the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDC) of Thailand, seniors (aged 60 or above) in 2020 number 12 million, or 18 per cent of the total population. The NESDB forecasts that the senior population will reach 20.42 million, or 31.28 per cent of the total population in 2040. At the same time, there is a corresponding decrease in the number of working-age people (15-59 years old) from 43.26 million in 2020 to 36.5 million in 2040. This represents a decrease from 65 percent to being only 56 percent of the total population.¹⁹ As Thailand faces a downward trend in working-age population, it continues to have a need for workers to keep its economy running.

Beside the relative economic strength of Thailand compared to Vietnam, there are also other reasons that attract UVMWs to come to this country. While the process to apply for jobs in countries such as Australia, South Korea, and Japan through broker companies is both expensive and time consuming, not to mention facing the risk of deception by unscrupulous individuals and

labour-

source#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20recent%20study,estimated%2050%2C000%20are%20in%20Thailand.

¹⁶ Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Report*, 17.

¹⁷ “Countries comparison, Vietnam vs. Thailand,” <https://countryeconomy.com/countries/compare/vietnam/thailand>

¹⁸ Watcharee Srikham, “UVMWs in Ubon Ratchathani Municipality,” *Journal of Mekong Societies* 10, No.1 (2014): 140.

¹⁹ “Working-age population decreasing: NESDC,” *The Nation Thailand* (15 January 2020), <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/30380560>

companies, going to Thailand is a much simpler and less risky endeavor. Even though salaries in these countries are quite high, not everyone can afford the financial investment of up to 10,000 USD to get a job in South Korea or Japan. On the other hand, going to Thailand does not have to be done through middlemen. About 15-20 years ago when the wave of UVMWs going to Thailand was just in its early stages, many people relied on individuals who charged a fee for arranging the trip and accompanying them to Thailand, even finding them job placements. Nowadays, the services of guides continue to be needed, but only to help get the individual safely into the country and with minimal difficulties at the immigration checkpoint where Vietnamese suspected of not entering Thailand for tourism purposes may be given a difficult time or are denied entry by immigration officers.

Going to Thailand is also an attractive option partially because the trip is relatively easy. In later years, the road conditions have greatly improved both in Vietnam as well as in Laos and Cambodia, making the trip much less time consuming and difficult than in the past. A person can very well have breakfast in Vietnam, then lunch in Laos, and finally enjoy dinner in Thailand. The returning trip to Vietnam is also equally convenient. On special occasions such as Tet (Lunar New Year), religious festivals, and family events such as weddings and funerals, they can easily make the trip home to take part in these affairs. When emergencies and family issues arise needing their presence to help solve problems, most can make it back to their homes within 24 hours of traveling by bus. Traveling by air between Thailand and Vietnam has also become significantly more affordable in recent years with the popularity of low-cost airlines flying one-way for as low as 50 USD between Bangkok and Hanoi.

Beside the proximity and the convenient means of traveling between Vietnam and Thailand, another important factor is the policy of visa exemption for citizens of ASEAN member countries traveling within the region. Vietnamese entering the kingdom of Thailand are able to stay for a maximum of 30 days without having to apply for a visa. Afterward, they must leave the kingdom. However, for the majority of UVMWs, they deal with the issue by taking a bus to the border, leaving the country (entering Laos or Cambodia), then coming back in with a fresh stamp for another 30 day stay. This routine takes place over and over again for the majority of UVMWs. For a small number of workers who do not want to deal with the hassle of the monthly visa run, they choose to take the risk of letting their visa expire and become not only people who work illegally in Thailand, but also remain illegally in the country.

The next factor that attracts UVMWs to Thailand is the relatively high level of income that they can achieve here. Comparing to low-skilled jobs in Vietnam such as peddling fruits and ice cream, working at restaurants and pubs, and sewing, etc. the income in Thailand may be twice or three times greater than what can be made in their homeland. With a stable job, a worker can save about 10,000 – 20,000 baht (280 – 560 USD) each month in order to send back home to help with family finances. This is not a small amount of money for individuals who come from the rural areas, most of whom have not finished secondary education. This is even more remarkable considering that in 2018 and 2019, Vietnam had 142,300 and 124,500 people with university degrees unemployed, respectively.²⁰

²⁰ “Hơn 100.000 cử nhân thất nghiệp và sự lãng phí tiền bạc, tuổi trẻ,” Zing News (13 October 2019), <https://zingnews.vn/hon-100000-cu-nhan-that-nghiep-va-su-lang-phi-tien-bac-tuoi-tre-post1000476.html>

In summary, the factors that give rise to the phenomenon of UVMWs coming to Thailand reflect both the situation in the sending as well as the receiving countries. Even though Vietnamese workers are making a living in Thailand illegally, and the Thai-Vietnam labor cooperation plan remains in the early stages of implementation, reality shows that Thailand continues to be an attractive destination for UVMWs both in the present and in the future.

3. Experience of Marginalization by UVMWs in Thailand

The experience of marginalization among migrant workers is not a new subject of research and has been addressed by numerous scholars and in a variety of contexts (Calavita 1998; Schatz & Schiffer 2008; Srivirojana et al. 2014; O'Neil et al. 2016; Zhizhko 2016; Müller 2016). Although there has been a number of papers written about the experience of UVMWs in Thailand, these papers have not focused on the experience of marginalization faced by the undocumented and largely young UVMWs (Sripana 2004; Nguyen & Walsh 2014; Srikham 2014; Le Duc 2016). This study aims to highlight this facet of their life in Thailand as well as discuss how the experience of marginalization could be mitigated with the help of social media.

Identification of migrant workers: In Thailand, Vietnamese workers, like their counterparts from Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, are almost always referred to, even in official mass media and government statements, as “khon tang dao” (alien) or “reng ngan tang dao” (alien laborer). Surprisingly, when speaking about other foreigners, especially Westerners, this term is usually not used. Instead, the words “tang chart” or “tang prathet” are used to refer to non-Thai nationals. Although the terms “tang dao,” “tang chart” and “tang prathet” are indicated as synonyms in the Thai language dictionary, in the actual daily experience of foreigners in Thailand, the term “tang dao” carries a somewhat pejorative connotation that causes those to whom the term is applied feel belittled and denigrated. This discriminatory use is clearly reflected in the results of the Google search, where a search using the keyword “khon tang dao” results in content and photos of government and law officials giving press conferences about foreign workers as well as photos of manual laborers holding their work permits, or being checked and arrested by the police. On the other hand, the same search using the keyword “khon tang chart” results in photos of happy, well-dressed tourists and professionals from various countries around the world.

Economic hardships: Most UVMWs in Thailand hail from the northern provinces of Vietnam, particularly Ha Tinh and Nghe An. With a few exceptions, the overwhelming majority are from rural families, and have had limited education. Only a small number have completed secondary education, and it is rare to find someone who has a college degree. The vast majority of UVMWs fall in the age group of 16 to 30 years old of both genders. Upon coming to the country, they find employment in such jobs as serving in restaurants and bars, working in the garment industry, and peddling fruits, vegetables, and ice cream, etc. The majority of the migrant workers work 10 to 15 hours a day, both day and night depending on the type of work they are engaged in. Few have days off other than when they have to do their monthly visa runs or on important public holidays when certain businesses choose to close.

Heavy cost of illegal work: To be engaged in employment in Thailand literally comes with a price. When Vietnamese nationals arrive at immigration checkpoints such as the Nong Khai and Nakhon Phanom checkpoints on the Thai-Lao border, they do not queue up like other tourists but

are required to make a separate line that takes them into a more private enclosed space. There, they are asked to pay an unofficial fee in order to be allowed entry—a fee that would not be applied to anyone entering the country as a bona fide tourist. The fact that these Vietnamese are not tourists is evidenced by the multiple visa-runs that are on immigration records and the stamps on their passports.

Not only do Vietnamese workers have to pay off immigration officials since the moment they enter the country, virtually everyone has to pay off officials from various police divisions either directly or through their employers in order to be allowed to work. Payments are from 500 up to several thousand baht per person/official/police division. One UVMW who has a stall selling fruits at an evening market in Laksi District of Bangkok reports paying a total of 7 separate divisions each month. However, despite paying off local officials, many still get arrested when the police from the higher level or from the labor department come to make their raids. Some police officials arrest Vietnamese workers not necessarily to enforce the law, but simply to extort a payment before letting them go. Extortion payment and bribes, which ranges anywhere from 1,000 baht to 20,000 baht per person, are not only transacted on the premises where the arrests take place, but often times even after they have been taken to the police station. In the case that the arrested have been transferred to the immigration department, bail needs to be paid before being released. Because bails have to be posted by a Thai citizen, UVMWs often must enlist the service of a Thai person, of course for a sizable fee. The subsequent trial usually leads to a fine and deportation from the country coupled with the violator's name appearing on the blacklist for at least five years. For those who manage to not get themselves arrested, more money is shelved out when they make their monthly visa-runs in order to extend their stay in the country.

The fact that UVMWs are engaging in employment without permits in Thailand also means that they are not entitled to any worker's benefits. Some have reported being abused or forced to work long hours without fair compensation. Many have been cheated by their employers who refuse payment for work done. When treated unjustly, Vietnamese workers are not able to resort to legal means to demand justice for themselves. When facing illness, UVMWs must take care of all their medical expenses, which in cases of serious illness or accidents can cost up to hundreds of thousands of baht.

Social marginalization: Needless to say, UVMWs in Thailand face many constraints in their lives. The majority have to work long hours with one or even two jobs, leaving little time for leisure and relaxation. A number of Catholic workers have reported that they could not attend church service on Sunday because they have to work. Not showing up for work means risking being fired from the job. Because of legal and financial constraints, there are also few opportunities for social gathering. Life for the majority of the UVMWs revolves around the place where they work and where they stay. This is vastly different from the lifestyle that UVMWs experience in their homeland. Virtually all the Vietnamese working in Thailand come from the rural countryside of Vietnam where the extended family and community with close knit relationships play especially important roles as sources of social and emotional support. In addition, for young people family and community are essential in providing structure and guidance in ongoing social, moral and spiritual formation. UVMWs of Catholic background grow up in an even more structured environment in which daily schedules often include church activities such as morning Mass and evening prayers. Despite how life is deeply structured by the family, community, and church (for Catholics) for UVMWs in their homeland, the situation is vastly different when they come to Thailand. Here the Vietnamese workers mostly live either on their own, with friends, or with other

siblings and relatives. However, there is virtually no supervision from traditional adult figures such as parents, community leaders and parish priests, which can lead to neglect in spiritual matters and unruly behavior typical of unsupervised youth life. Marginalization results in part because Vietnamese youth in Thailand are forced to conduct their lives virtually without any formal guidance as found in the traditional networks.

Arrests and deportation: Marginalization experienced by Vietnamese youth in Thailand is most heightened by the ever present risk of getting arrested, which takes place on a regular basis, and especially intensified during highly publicized campaigns to crack down on undocumented foreign migrant workers. One such campaign took place in June 2014 after the military government rose to power through a bloodless coup. In that campaign, hundreds of thousands of foreign migrant workers were forced to flee the country, among them Vietnamese as well as Cambodians and Burmese who failed to register for work permits. The “exodus” took place again in September 2015 with the government’s sudden decision to put a halt to visa runs, which meant any Vietnamese not leaving the country would end up overstaying their visa. One year after that, another widely publicized crackdown campaign was launched targeting foreigners who were supposedly “stealing” or “snatching” jobs reserved exclusively for Thai people by peddling food on the street or opening stalls at the markets. Authorities were quoted in the media saying that foreigners should only take jobs that Thai people did not want. According to Sunai Phasuk from Human Rights Watch, this level of anti-immigrant sentiment in Thailand was unprecedented. “There seems to be a surge of national sentiment in Thai immigration policy claiming migrants from Vietnam, for example, are taking jobs that are reserved for Thai nationals. We haven’t seen this kind of rise in anti-immigrant sentiment for decades. This has a lot to do economic concerns.”²¹

The anti-foreigner sentiment has not subsided over the years. Periodic raids large and small have been carried out without cease, some as part of a larger national campaign to stem illegal migrant workers or to get rid of foreign criminals who make Thailand a base for their illegal operations. In the first two weeks of June 2019 alone, Thai police arrested 2,274 foreigners in Northeast Thailand, among them people suspected to be part of criminal gangs from Cameroon and Colombia. Those arrested included foreigners who illegally entered the country, worked without permission, and overstayed their visas.²² In August 2019, Thai government officials touted statistics of having checked the status of 599,148 people within the period from 1 July 2018 to 13 August 2019. From this number, nearly 8,000 were found to be illegal and faced prosecution and fines. In the end, over 7,000 were deported and a total of over 35.5 million baht in fines were collected.²³ The numerous raids accompanied by media campaigns that disparage undocumented migrant workers have taken a toll on the livelihood of Vietnamese workers in Thailand. Since 2018, UVMWs who run B-B-Q delivery service have reported drastic drop in number of orders after Thai news media reported of police raids made on their “shops” and that the meat being sold to customers was low-grade and unsanitary.²⁴

²¹ “Thailand cracks down on migrant workers as anti-immigration feelings rise,” Reuters (30 September 2016), <http://www.voanews.com/a/reu-thailand-cracks-down-on-migrant-workers/3531387.html>.

²² “Immigration police arrest 2,000 in Isan,” Bangkok Post (16 June 2019), <https://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/easy/1696248/immigration-police-arrest-2-200-in-isan>.

²³ “ลุยจับต่างด้าว ทำงานผิดกฎหมายมีโทษปรับตั้งแต่ 5,000 - 50,000 บาท,” TNews (13 August 2019), <https://www.tnews.co.th/social/518718/ลุยจับต่างด้าว-ทำงานผิดกฎหมายมีโทษปรับตั้งแต่-5,000---50,000-บาท>

²⁴ “เวียตนามเสบ! ลอบขายหมูกระเพาะเดลิเวอรี่ มุกคั่นแทบช็อก สุดโศกโกรท,” News Monitor (25 June 2018), https://www.khaosod.co.th/monitor-news/news_1260853.

Episodic national campaigns coupled with negative portrayal in local media as well as the ongoing regular arrests for the purpose of extortion or otherwise create a great deal of instability for the life UVMWs, which by its very nature already contains much uncertainty. No doubt the sense of marginalization felt by undocumented migrant workers are heightened by the crackdown campaigns and the xenophobic rhetoric by government officials as well as the local mass media.

4. Marginalization during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Thailand is a country that thrives on its tourism industry, especially serving tourists from mainland China. So it was not a surprise that the coronavirus made its first appearance in the Kingdom by way of Chinese tourists from Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, the initial epicenter of the pandemic. After the World Health Organization (WHO) had declared that the novel coronavirus was the cause of respiratory illness on 12 January, Thailand had the honor of having the first confirmed case outside of China. The patient was a 61 year old woman who began to exhibit symptoms prior to flying with a tour group to Suvarnaphumi Airport in Bangkok on 8 January, where she was discovered by thermal detector to have a fever. The initial diagnosis of mild pneumonia by health officials turned into a confirmation of the novel coronavirus on 13 January. It came as no surprise since WHO had already issued a statement on 10 January warning other countries to expect the virus to spread beyond the borders of China.²⁵ Despite being the home to the first case outside of China, in the months of January and February, the number of people discovered to be infected was relatively low. The majority of the 42 cases at that time consisted of Chinese tourists, a few residents who had returned from China, and Thai people who were often in contact with foreign tourists due to their work.²⁶ The threat of the pandemic became more immanent in Thailand with the recording of the first death on 1 March, a 35-year old employee of the leading travel retail giant King Power Group. As more cases were detected, local officials began to announce cancellation of events and festivals including those associated with Thailand's biggest annual celebration of Songkran (Water Festival) scheduled for mid April.²⁷ March saw the beginning of more local infections including a breakout involving Lumpini boxing stadium that resulted in dozens of patients. On 15 March, officials reported 32 new cases, the largest daily jump in infections since the outbreak began in the country.²⁸ The number of new infections jumped to 111 on 17 March leading national and local officials to order the closing of schools,²⁹ entertainment venues such as bars, night clubs, and massage shops for 14 days in order to deal with the climbing infection numbers.³⁰ On 18 March, Thailand's neighboring country of Laos announced the closing

²⁵ "Wuhan pneumonia: Thailand confirms first case of virus outside China," South China Morning Post (13 January 2020), <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/3045902/wuhan-pneumonia-thailand-confirms-first-case>

²⁶ "New coronavirus infection in Thailand takes tally to 42," Reuters (29 February 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-thailand-idUSKBN20N07N>

²⁷ "Khao San Songkran party cancelled," Bangkok Post (9 March 2020), <https://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/easy/1875094/khao-san-songkran-party-cancelled>

²⁸ "Thailand reports 32 new coronavirus cases in the biggest single day rise," Bangkok Post (15 March 2020), <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1879300/thailand-reports-32-new-coronavirus-cases-in-biggest-single-day-rise>

²⁹ "All schools ordered to close from Wednesday," The Nation Thailand (17 March 2020), https://www.nationthailand.com/news/30384260?utm_source=homepage&utm_medium=internal_referral

³⁰ "Pattaya to close all entertainment venues such as bars, night clubs and massage shops until the end of the month," The Pattaya News (17 March 2020), <https://thepattayanews.com/2020/03/17/pattaya-to-close-all-entertainment-venues-such-as-bars-nightclubs-and-massage-shops-until-the-end-of-the-month/>

of immigration checkpoints bordering the two countries.³¹ Thailand, on its part announced that it would close the immigration checkpoints along the Thai-Malaysia border.³² In the subsequent days, the immigration checkpoints between Thailand and Myanmar³³ and Thailand and Cambodia would be closed as well.³⁴ Cambodia also started to restrict entry of foreigners from various countries, including Vietnam, in order to prevent the spread of the virus within its borders. Vietnamese were no longer allowed into Cambodia beginning on 20 March.³⁵ In the midst of this, Thailand reported its largest daily jump of new cases ever on 22 March, logging in 188 and bringing the total number of infections in the country to 599 cases.

In the face of immigration checkpoint closures by Thailand with all of its neighboring countries, migrant workers faced an extremely difficult situation. As countries were closing down businesses and potentially going into lockdown, they had to decide whether to go home or try to ride out the pandemic in Thailand until things returned to normal. As the vast majority of the millions of migrant workers in Thailand hailed from the four neighboring ASEAN countries of Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, the escalating crisis saw an exodus of migrant workers to their home countries where at the time, the pandemic was much more mild. Among the four countries, Vietnam had the largest number of cases. However, the total on 20 March was only 85, much fewer than that of Thailand.³⁶ It was not until 24 March that Laos confirmed its first two cases of the virus.³⁷ Along with the news from Thai government officials that foreigners infected with the virus would have to bankroll their own treatment, many migrant workers felt little incentive to stay on. Therefore, in the days between 20-25 March, migrant workers from these four countries flooded to the various immigration checkpoints between Thailand and Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar as they tried to make their way home in order to escape the pandemic in Thailand and hoping for safer haven in their own countries.

When the Covid-19 pandemic began to escalate in mid March, UVMWs were caught in a difficult situation. Many had recently returned to Thailand after the Lunar New Year holidays in their country, hoping to work and save up. Some had only arrived a week or two. However, before they could even receive their first month's earning, businesses were forced to close and the country was getting ready to go into lockdown if the situation worsened. As airlines cancelled flights leaving the country and border immigration checkpoints also prepared to close, they had to make a choice of whether to stay and risked having their 1-month visa expired. Usually, Vietnamese extend their stay by going on visa-runs to Thailand's neighboring countries and re-enter the

³¹ "Laos shuts four border checkpoints amid Covid-19 crisis," *The Nation Thailand* (18 March 2020), <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/30384315>

³² "Thailand government announces closure of some border crossings," *Garda World* (18 March 2020), <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/324136/thailand-government-announces-closure-of-some-border-crossings-march-18-update-12>

³³ "Border closure delayed for stranded people to cross," *Bangkok Post* (21 March 2020), <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1883580/border-closure-delayed-for-stranded-people-to-cross>

³⁴ "Thailand begins closing land borders as coronavirus cases climb," *Thai Enquirer* (23 March 2020), <https://www.thaienquirer.com/9880/thailand-begins-closing-land-borders-as-coronavirus-cases-climb/>

³⁵ "Cambodia entry restrictions expanded as of march 20," *Garda World* (20 March 2020), <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/324841/cambodia-entry-restrictions-expanded-as-of-march-20-update-3>

³⁶ "Dịch COVID-19 (sáng ngày 20/3): Việt Nam công bố thêm 9 ca nhiễm nâng tổng số bệnh nhân lên 85," *Báo Đầu Thầu* (20 March 2020), <https://baodauthau.vn/thoi-su/dich-covid19-sang-ngay-203-viet-nam-cong-bo-them-9-ca-nhiem-nang-tong-so-benh-nhan-len-85-124413.html>

³⁷ "Laos confirms first Covid-19 cases," *Laotian Times* (24 March 2020), <https://laotiantimes.com/2020/03/24/laos-confirms-first-covid-19-cases/>

country with a fresh 30 day permission to stay. However, this would no longer be possible with the countries closing their borders. At that time, the Thai government had not made any decision about what to do regarding foreigners who were stuck in the country during the pandemic. Vietnamese as well as other foreigners were right to worry about what punishment awaited them if their documents expired.

Another cause for anxiety for UVMWs was not being fully informed on the real situation of the pandemic in Thailand. Although many UVMWs manage to speak conversational Thai to work in the country, most do not have good grasp of formal Thai language. Few follow the Thai language news outlets and most do not possess enough Thai language fluency to clearly understand the various dimensions related to the pandemic in the country. They had concerns about the severity of the pandemic in Thailand and in the localities where they were residing, issues that they could not easily get answers due to lack of language proficiency. Others were concerned about what services the Thai government would afford them in the case that they exhibited Covid-19 symptoms or if they had contracted the virus. Even information such as where to get tested was not known to the majority of the Vietnamese.

Because of many uncertainties about safety and livelihood in Thailand, many Vietnamese decided to rush to the border in order to go back to their country. Even then, they did not know whether they could make it in time because despite the official announcement that the immigration checkpoints between Thailand and Laos were closed, officials at the checkpoints were allowing people to go through on a day to day basis only at a certain checkpoint. Therefore, most were heading towards the checkpoints on either very short notice or on the single hope that the checkpoint would still be open for them to leave the next day. In these respects, there was no official channel of information that they could depend on.

A number of Vietnamese chose to take the last available flights between Thailand and Vietnam. However, many did not know how to check for available flights, did not know how to reserve flights, and even if they had managed to make reservations, did not know how to get updated information on the status of their flights. At a time when even the airlines themselves faced uncertainty and could not provide definitive advanced information about the status of their flights, it was even more difficult for Vietnamese to get the information needed. In the end, many bought tickets for flights that eventually would be cancelled. Nonetheless, few knew how to contact the airlines in order to obtain refunds. If reserving airline tickets were difficult, obtaining refunds from airline companies would be an even more formidable challenge. In the end, thousands of UVMWs managed to leave Thailand before the immigrant checkpoints were completely closed and all the flights were cancelled. On 26 March, Thailand went into lockdown as part of its state of emergency with a nighttime curfew imposed nationally. Those who chose to remain behind faced a situation of joblessness, no income, uncertainty about the risk of contracting the virus and the status of their visas. While the Thai government undertook various measures to mitigate the hardships brought upon its citizens by the pandemic, foreigners like UVMWs were essentially left to fend on their own.

A female migrant worker L.T. who normally works as a waitress in Bangkok said that during the first month of lockdown, she had no job and no money to buy food. "I had to ask for help from customers that I was close to in order to have food to eat," she said. "It was only later on that I managed to find temporary work in order to survive."

P.N.X. and her husband work as vendors selling fruits. According to P., during the lockdown they were not able to work and had no income. Nevertheless, their daily expenses increased because their three small children back in Vietnam did not go to school, which meant more money had to be spent on food, milk and other things for them.

A young man named B.B. said that during pandemic, he was only able to have one meal a day. “The landlord is about to evict us because we haven’t paid rent for three months. I have been looking for work every day, but without success,” he said.

T.D.N. who worked in the province of Chacheongsao reported that during the pandemic, he often had to go to the river to fish in order to have food.

B.N. arrived back to Phuket one month before the pandemic took hold of the famous tourist island in southern Thailand. Because Phuket was one of the worst hit provinces outside of Bangkok, the island went into lockdown, and people whose livelihood depended mostly on tourism were greatly affected. B.N. reported depending on charity handout of rice, instant noodles and eggs to survive.

T.D., who works as a manicurist in Bangkok shared that in all her time in Thailand, this had been the most difficult ever. Because all beauty salons were forced to close during the height of the pandemic in Thailand, she was left without a regular job. She resorted to doing various odd jobs in order to survive. “I think I would have fallen into great depression if it were not for the grace of God,” she said. “I was grateful for the help of the Catholic priests who helped me with some money and words of encouragement.”

N.P. not only was unable to work during the coronavirus outbreak, she also suffered the loss of her husband who died in Vietnam from an illness. Unfortunately, because there was no way to leave Thailand and return to Vietnam, she had to mourn her husband’s passing from faraway. “I am in great pain because I could not be at home for my husband’s funeral,” she said.

Hardship during the pandemic was not only the experience of UVMWs. Thai people also faced enormous challenges. However, Thai people had the benefit of living in their own country, and could receive various types of relief measures from the government, for example the 5,000 baht handout to people with low income. In the case that they contracted the virus, Thai people would of course be guaranteed free treatment. Thai people also benefitted from family, community, religious and social support networks during time of crisis. On the other hand, UVMWs had none of these channels and means of support.

Like the majority of foreigners who entered Thailand on temporary visas or visa-exemption programs, UVMWs had to deal with the status of their visas. Into early April, when the lockdown had gone into effect for nearly two weeks, while other countries such as Japan and Cambodia had already announced amnesty for foreigners stuck in the country, the Thai government was still considering whether or not to do the same. Immigration and other government officials expressed reluctance towards an amnesty action on reasons of national security. During late March and early April, foreigners whose visas were about to expire were required by the Thai Immigration Bureau to go to their respective embassies in order to obtain a letter confirming their inability to return home – despite the fact that all the airports and land border crossings had already shut down. After that, they were to take the letter to the immigration office in order to obtain an extension of maximum 30 days for their stay in the Kingdom. This requirement was a great inconvenience for foreigners and for UVMWs in particular. For Vietnamese migrants, having to go to the embassy

in Bangkok or the General Consulate in Khon Kaen Province (NE Thailand) meant significant traveling and paperwork expenses. For many, it was not a short trip but a trip of many hours by tour bus and taxi. For example, a person in Nakhon Pathom province would have to make a six-hour trip to Khon Kaen province in order to obtain the letter from the Vietnamese General Consulate. Although the Vietnamese embassy agreed to grant the confirmation letter electronically, the majority of UVMWs in Thailand did not know how to fill out the request form and send it to the embassy by email. Once the letter from the embassy was obtained, it had to be taken to the immigration office to apply for extension. The paperwork at the immigration office, however, was not simple and not uniform. Immigration offices in Bangkok and in various provinces apparently required different documents. In some provincial immigration offices, applicants were required to have a long list of documents. One office even required the applicant to provide a “selfie” taken at their temporary residence as evidence of stay. Despite all that trouble, the provincial immigration office usually only gave a 10-day or 14-day stamp, requiring the applicant to make a second trip if they wanted the rest of the allowable 30-days. For a Vietnamese living in Bangkok, all the paperwork and traveling expenses combined to get the extension would amount to 120-150 USD – a third of a month’s earning for many UVMWs. The most incredible thing is that all of this hassle was taking place at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in Thailand. Foreigners were flocking to the immigration offices throughout the country in order to get their documents stamped while the public were being advised to stay home and practice social distance in order to flatten the infection curve. Fortunately, the country’s leaders finally realized that forcing foreigners to congregate in large numbers at immigration offices was dangerous for both the foreigners as well as for immigration officers, and decided to adopt an amnesty measure on 8 April.³⁸ This measure which initially granted foreigners amnesty until 30 April would later be extended until the end of July,³⁹ and finally until 26 September in a second round. However, by then, countless foreigners had to spend money that they were already not having enough of in order to survive. Although many UVMWs were willing to spend the money and risked their health in order to maintain their visa, others declared that if they spent money on the extension, they would have nothing left to live on.

On 25 April 2020, Thai health officials reported 53 new cases of Covid-19 infection, the largest single day increase since 9 April. Of the 53 cases, 42 were of foreigners being detained in the immigration center in the province of Songkhla, southern Thailand. According to immigration officials, the foreigners were being detained for illegally entering the country. Those who were infected comprised of individuals from Myanmar (34), Vietnam (3), Malaysia (2), Yemen (1), Cambodia (1) and India (1).⁴⁰ Although officials traced the infection cluster to an immigration officer who worked at Sadao border checkpoint,⁴¹ on social media many Thai people, upset with

³⁸ “PM Prayuth signs order to grant visa amnesty to foreigners in Thailand,” *Thaivisa* (8 April 2020), <https://forum.thaivisa.com/topic/1158449-pm-prayuth-signs-order-to-grant-visa-amnesty-to-foreigners-in-thailand/>

³⁹ “Visas extended, relief measures approved,” *Bangkok Post* (21 April 2020), <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1904435/visas-extended-relief-measures-approved>

⁴⁰ “42 migrant workers among new cases,” *Bangkok Post* (26 April 2020), <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1907405/42-migrant-workers-among-new-cases>

⁴¹ “Jail turned into field hospital after 42 foreigners caught virus,” *Khaosod English* (27 April 2020), <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/crimecourtscalamity/2020/04/27/jail-turned-into-field-hospital-after-42-foreigners-caught-virus/>

a spike in the number of cases after several weeks of a downward trend, accused the foreigners of entering the country knowing that they were positive for the coronavirus. According to them, these people knew that Thai medical services were of high quality and tried to exploit the system by entering the country. Interestingly, other foreigners such as Chinese and Europeans discovered to be positive for Covid-19 upon entering Thailand or while in the country were not accused of this scheme. Some seemed to be unaware that at that time in Vietnam, the rate of infection was much lower than in Thailand with no reported death thus far due to Covid-19. Moreover, in countries like Cambodia, the government declared that foreigners could receive free treatment. On 27 March, the *Khmer Times* reported that two Indonesians entered Cambodia from Thailand knowing they were positive for Covid-19 after learning that they could get free treatment in Cambodia.⁴² In a speech to volunteer medical staff on 25 March, Prime Minister Hun Sen confirmed that all COVID-19 patients would be treated in the country regardless of their nationalities.⁴³ In Thailand, they would have to bankroll their treatment, which could cost hundreds of thousands of THB. This, however, did not stop some Thai people from accusing these undocumented people from trying to take advantage of the system, a sentiment that intensified when a second batch of 18 detainees from the same center were reported to have tested positive for the virus on 4 May—on a day when no Thai was reported infected.⁴⁴ Few seemed to sympathize with the fact that the cluster most likely occurred because the foreigners were being detained as large groups which would have made the spread of the virus much more likely. The communal living in less than ideal conditions contributed to the large number of people being infected rather than them being infected prior to entering the country. According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), immigration detention centers are considered “high-risk locations for the spread of communicable infections, as they are often overcrowded and lack adequate healthcare, food and water, sanitation and hygiene.”⁴⁵

The episode involving the infection cluster in the Songkhla Immigration Detention Center illustrates to a certain extent the negative experience faced by foreign migrants, among them undocumented UVMWs. The factors that create a sense of marginalization are intensified in situations where the interests and well-being of local people are considered of priority or that the interests of foreigners are perceived as in conflict with those of the local people. Oftentimes, marginalization is simply due to the fact that undocumented migrant workers do not have support networks either from the authority or from NGOs that work on their behalf.

5. Use of Social Media to Mitigate Everyday Experience of Marginalization

Facing emotional and physical stress experienced in their lives as undocumented migrant workers, UVMWs in Thailand cope with social marginalization by turning primarily to social

⁴² “Two Indonesians flee Thailand to Cambodia for free COVID-19 treatment,” *Khmertimes* (27 March 2020), <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/706641/two-indonesians-flee-thailand-to-cambodia-for-free-covid-19-treatment/>

⁴³ Phoung Vantha, “Two Indonesians Becomes Cambodia’s Latest COVID-19 Patients,” *Cambodianess* (27 March 2020), <https://cambodianess.com/article/two-indonesians-becomes-cambodias-latest-covid-19-patients>

⁴⁴ “18 illegal immigrants found to carry Covid-19 in Songkhla,” *The Nation Thailand* (4 May 2020), <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/30387242>

⁴⁵ “42 detainees in Songkhla Immigration Detention Center test positive for COVID-19,” *Fortify Rights* (1 May 2020), <https://www.fortifyrights.org/tha-inv-2020-05-01/>

media. In recent years, Facebook has gained much popularity in Vietnam, which is also one of Facebook's fastest growing markets in the world. As of January 2020, Vietnam had an internet penetration at 70 percent with 68.17 million users. Among these, 65 million also used social media.⁴⁶ Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Vietnam, used by 61 million people overwhelmingly with mobile phones. By July 2020, this number had risen to 64 million. Vietnam ranks 7th in the world in terms of number of Facebook users.⁴⁷ Most Facebook users in Vietnam are young, ranging in age from 18 to 34 years old. The majority use Facebook to post photos, view videos and chat with others through the Facebook Messenger application. A number of Vietnamese also use Facebook as a platform to sell goods.⁴⁸ As Facebook is also popular in Thailand, which has 50 million users out of a 70 million population,⁴⁹ UVMWs in Thailand overwhelmingly choose Facebook as their platform of choice.⁵⁰ One would be hard pressed to find any UVMW without a Facebook account. Many report using Facebook up to five or six hours a day during working hours as well as after work. Because UVMWs work both day and night shifts depending on the type of employment, one finds them online in every hour of the day. For UVMWs in Thailand, Facebook is not only a way to share photos, thoughts, and keep connected with friends and family, it is also a source of news and entertainment because many news articles and video clips are shared on this platform.

The prevalent use of Facebook by UVMWs in Thailand has led to the social network having a distinct role in the life of this group. It has become the most common way for them to keep in touch with family members in Vietnam. In addition, because a large number of UVMWs are young parents who have left their children in the care of grandparents, aunts and uncles back home, mobile messaging apps are the cheapest and most convenient way to follow up on their children's daily routines, behavior, as well as maintain parent-child bond. Among UVMWs, there are also many cases where either the wife or the husband remains in the country while the other partner goes abroad to work. Thus, mobile messaging apps also serve as the primary way married couples could maintain regular contact.

Besides serving as a way to keep in touch with family members, Facebook also serves as a means by which the UVMWs can obtain information that previously could only be spread through word of mouth. Presently, there are dozens of public community or group Facebook pages established for the purpose of discussions and information exchange. A group called "Hội Người Việt tại Thái" (Organization of Vietnamese in Thailand) as of February 2021, has over 103,000 members, and is the largest FB group devoted to matters concerning the Vietnamese migrant community in Thailand. One of the creators and main administrators of the page is Ha Van Phuc. According to Ha, the page was created nine years ago when there was little if any effort in the general Vietnamese migrant community in Thailand to establish something that would serve the entire community. As the page became increasingly well-known and influential in the community, other pages were also created leading to nearly a dozen pages of this kind. Members turn to the

⁴⁶ "Digital 2020: Vietnam," Datareportal (18 February 2020), <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-vietnam#:~:text=There%20were%2068.17%20million%20internet,at%2070%25%20in%20January%202020>.

⁴⁷ "Leading countries based on Facebook audience size as of July 2020," Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/268136/top-15-countries-based-on-number-of-facebook-users/>

⁴⁸ "Number of Vietnam Facebook users," Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/490478/number-of-vietnam-facebook-users/>.

⁴⁹ "Social Media Trends," Lexicon, <https://lexiconthai.com/blog/social-media-trends-2019-facebook-in-thailand/>.

⁵⁰ A much smaller number of UVMWs in Thailand use Instagram. However, there is no exact count of this usage.

forum mostly for general matters such as inquiring about possible employment opportunities, seeking assistance for visa-runs or sending remittances home, and advertising one's goods and services. Many members also post news and information that directly affect the life of UVMWs in Thailand. News about possible or actual police raids and Vietnamese arrested for wrongdoing are enthusiastically shared and commented upon by members.

Other posts that receive great attention from members include news of traffic accidents in which there are Vietnamese victims. In 2019, a number of serious accidents took place involving the vehicles of CPS company, the largest visa-run service for Vietnamese and Lao workers in Thailand. These accidents resulted in the injury or death of dozens of the company's passengers, both Vietnamese and Lao nationals. News clips and photos of these accidents were posted onto various forums, which were then shared by many members leading to calls by a number of vocal members to boycott the company. Due to the bad publicity that the company was receiving from its customers, CPS responded by organizing a meeting with popular Facebook page administrators and Vietnamese workers on 31 August 2019 in order to clarify misunderstandings and to discuss ways to improve the service. CPS also responded to various questions and concerns with an official statement subsequent to the meeting, which was posted on the various Facebook group pages as well as their newly created Facebook page. According to Ha, "One of the aims for creating 'Hội Người Việt Tại Thái' was to create a platform for meeting and mutual support in life and in work related matters. The goals of this platform have been realized at a certain level because it has become a place where many come to seek friendship when they are lonely, assistance when they face difficulty, and happiness when they encounter sadness in their lives."⁵¹

In addition to general community pages, there are also Facebook pages that are religion focused. For example, the community page "Liên Hiệp Công Giáo Việt Nam tại Thái Lan" (Vietnamese Catholic Association in Thailand) serves as the official page for the Pastoral Committee for Vietnamese Migrants under the auspices of the Bishops' Conference of Thailand. The content of the page mostly includes weekly Mass schedules or photos of important liturgical celebrations that have already taken place. Before the phenomenon of social media, organizers of Masses depended on publicity by word of mouth. The age of social media has made this task much easier, and Masses on important occasions such as Easter, Christmas or the Assumption of Mary saw attendance of anywhere from a 1,000 to 2,000 people. The small group Masses that take place in various churches on a week to week basis see attendance from a few dozen up to several hundred people. For Catholic UVMWs, having access to the church and sacraments in their native language is a valuable source of spiritual support that helps to mitigate the sense of marginalization experienced on a daily basis. Due to lack of fluency in Thai language, especially formal language used in liturgy and ceremonies, Vietnamese workers cannot attend Thai language Masses and be able to understand much of it. Many also report unable to receive the sacrament of reconciliation due to language difficulties. For this sacrament, they especially depend on Vietnamese priests in order to receive the sacrament regularly and in a language that they can understand. The employment of social media to announce the location and time of masses in various places means that more Catholic UVMWs are able to receive sacraments to nourish their spiritual lives.

The role of social media in mitigation of marginalization for UVMWs can most be seen clearly in time of crisis. Sudden illness, or injuries and death due to traffic and work accidents are common among the UVMWs. When tragedy happens, they receive almost no support from the local government or any social organization in Thailand. As undocumented persons, Vietnamese

⁵¹ The interview with Ha Van Phuc was conducted via Facebook Messenger on September 22, 2019.

workers will not dare to reach out to Thai people for help. Therefore, in time of crisis, social media becomes the primary channel for UVMWs to communicate to one another in order to seek support and assistance. Words of condolences, fundraising efforts, and suggestions on how to deal with the matter are all communicated via social media. Such fundraising efforts can yield monetary support anywhere from 20,000 baht up to several hundred thousand baht, depending on the severity of situation. When UVMWs reach out to each other for support, they often use the famous Vietnamese adage of “healthy leaves protecting the torn leaves.” Others add to the familiar expression saying, “The torn leaves in turn protect the tattered ones,” suggesting that although the situation of UVMWs is not good, they can always share with those who are even worse off.

6. Use of Social Media to Mitigate Marginalization in During the Covid-19 Pandemic

The second part of March and first half of April 2020 represented the most chaotic and stressful time for UVMWs in Thailand as discussed earlier. The stress was intensified because many did not have access to official information regarding the continuously changing situation – both the general pandemic and issues that directly affected them as migrant workers in a foreign country. The information that they did receive through social media was often unclear or contradictory. For example, between 20-25 March, one source of information would say that immigration checkpoints were closed while another would declare that it was still open. Regarding visa extensions, before the official announcement of amnesty took place, there was a lot of conflicting information as well. Some sources maintained the all foreigners must go to the immigration office in order to extend their stay in the Kingdom while others declared that no such action was necessary. People could simply let their visa run out until the border checkpoints reopen, after which they could resume their visa-run without penalty. This was an issue of great stress and anxiety for UVMWs because although they wanted to save time and money as well as maintain social distance, the wrong decision could get them arrested, deported and blacklisted from the country.

It was during this time that my active presence on social media was of great service to UVMWs. As someone who has engaged in spiritual and social support for UVMWs in Thailand for over 13 years, I am well-known in the community. Many know me through church-related activities, but many more, especially non-Catholics know me through social media. During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in Thailand, I maintained an extremely active presence online – posting updates on the pandemic that were most relevant to the situation of UVMWs. I scoured Thai and English language news portals, followed the daily briefings from the Center for Disease Control, kept in contact with the Vietnamese Embassy in Thailand, and in constant touch with various Vietnamese who may have information on certain matters. The purpose was to have accurate, up-to-date and relevant news in order to relay to the Vietnamese, many of whom declared that until they saw it on my page, they would not believe anything that was announced in the other Vietnamese social media pages. At the same time, my Facebook inbox was flooded with queries related to things that I posted or matters that people read or heard elsewhere and wanted me to “fact check.” My posts were also widely shared to other community and personal pages as well. I became a one-man news outlet for UVMWs as they tried to understand the situation and make decisions on matters of great importance to their lives and livelihood.

As the pandemic wore on, many UVMWs found themselves in dire situations without much recourse for help. A number of people had no more money for rent and food because no work was available. One couple who was staying in Northeast Thailand gave birth to a premature baby who had to be taken to ICU because the newborn was not able to breathe on his own. Another young man working in southern Thailand fell ill of dengue fever and died in the hospital on Samui Island. A third person also died in a Bangkok hospital after a fire accident took place in his rented room. In all these instances, I was contacted via social media for financial assistance. In the case of the hospitalized newborn and the deceased young men, expenses were extremely high, and there was no way the people involved in the situations were able to help themselves. Therefore, they turned to me, and I in turn sought out social media to for help as I have done countless times in the past. Despite being in the middle of a pandemic where most were barely making ends meet with their savings or whatever they could make with odd jobs, many responded with small donations to help their fellow countrymen. Thus, without official channels for assistance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, UVMWs in Thailand relied on fellow Vietnamese for support, and often facilitated by social media.

7. Areas of Concern

Although young UVMWs in Thailand have learned to use social in many beneficial ways, especially as a source of social and emotional support in a situation where such support is difficult to obtain, there cannot be denial that there are still many areas of concern. The majority of the issues point towards the imprudent use and abuse of social media in their lives as individuals and as a group.

Lack of adult supervision in the use of social media. Social media is a world filled with excitement and possibilities for new relationships, but also fraught with danger. Young people, no matter if they are students or migrant workers, need adult supervision and guidance in order to regulate their usage of and involvement in social media activities. When young people live in a family environment or other environment where there is some level of adult guidance, the dangers associated with uncontrolled social media use can be minimized. Unfortunately, while many of the UVMWs in Thailand are young people, even teenagers, they often do not benefit from this kind of adult supervision. They live far away from their family, working in another country, oftentimes living with friends and acquaintances of similar age group. Some may be living with older siblings, but they themselves are also working long hours as migrant workers and cannot always have the time or the patience to follow closely what the young people are doing. As a result of the lack of necessary supervision, many young migrant workers end up spending excessive amount of time on social media, or making inappropriate posts, including livestreaming activities that are prohibited by Thai laws, e.g. butchering a stray dog for a drinking party with friends in their apartment.

Lack of control and regulation. As mentioned previously, there are many Facebook groups serving the Vietnamese migrant community in Thailand. However, most of these groups do not belong to any official organization, but have been created by the young UVMWs themselves.

Therefore, the young administrators of these pages become the ones to set up rules for the page and to moderate the content. Unfortunately, due to the unofficial nature of the pages and lacking clear mechanisms to regulate content, some of the pages become a smorgasbord of community news, product advertisements, self-introductions looking for friends, gossips, and personal attacks. In some pages, serious enquiries posted by a member are responded with rude and unhelpful comments. Personal insults and attacks are common in many of the exchanges in these groups leading to these pages being characterized as a “chaotic market” more than a “digital community space”.

Misuse of social media. It has become increasingly common to open a Facebook group page or personal profile page of young UVMWs in Thailand and see posts calling out particular individuals for deception. These posts almost always include multiple photos of the alleged wrongdoer, usually taken from his/her Facebook profile. Sometimes, even a photo of their passport is included. Those find themselves exposed on social media have been accused of a variety of things including stealing property, not returning money borrowed, not paying for particular services, not living up to some sort of agreed arrangement, and even for stealing one’s lover. Needless to say, these posts garner much interest and elicit many comments from netizens, mostly taking the side of the individual making the post and condemning the individual accused of wrongdoing. Although these posts are extremely common on personal profiles and group pages of the UVMWs in Thailand, it is virtually impossible to verify the accuracy of these accusations. While some posts also contain messages between the accuser and the accused as evidence, one hardly gets the whole story in order to be able to reach a reasonable conclusion. What is certain, however, is that these accusations, when they are false can be extremely detrimental to a person’s reputation and emotional well-being. Unfortunately, for young UVMWs in Thailand, there seems to be few established mechanisms to regulate and verify the accuracy of these posts that are widely shared and commented upon.

Lack of authority to fact-check information. From what has been presented previously, it can be seen that accurate information, especially in matters pertaining to the lives and livelihood of the young UVMWs in Thailand, is a particularly important need in this community. In reality, a lot of information posted on social media is about things happening in Thai society in general, and about the Vietnamese migrant community in particular. These posts are possible because there is a number of Vietnamese migrant workers who have a relatively good command of the Thai language and are informed on happenings taking place in the country. For example, at the end of 2020, when Thailand experienced the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic, the Pastoral Committee for Vietnamese Migrants (Thai Bishops’ Conference) decided to launch a Vietnamese Facebook “hotline and information” page in order to communicate up-to-date and relevant information about the pandemic to Vietnamese people living in Thailand. This page is administered by a young Vietnamese who graduated from a Thai university and is now working in the department of human resource of Assumption University in Bangkok. The posts made on this page always indicate the source of information, for example credible Thai news agencies, and therefore can be double-checked.

Unfortunately, this is not the case for the vast majority of the posts made on other social media pages, where information is not always accompanied by sources that could be fact-checked. As a result, a great deal of information is presented to the community without any authoritative individual or organization serving to identify and regulate fake news and misinformation. While some trusted individuals in the community like myself can be relied upon for accurate information, I do not have the time to be constantly updating news on my social media page. And I certainly do not have the time and the desire to go to various social media pages in order to fact-check the posts made there.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the experience of young UVMWs in Thailand and the role and impact of social media in their lives, certain salient points can be made:

- Social media can serve as a platform where migrant communities in diaspora can turn to for information that most concern their situation, relying on trustworthy, albeit unofficial sources of information to assist in making decisions with important issues related to their lives and livelihood. Social media can prove to be effective in urgent matters because information can be relayed much faster and with a wide reach among the target group. Although the general media contain a vast amount of information, that information is not always geared towards a particular group. The nature of social media allows for creating specific networks where the most relevant information and issues pertinent to a community can be shared.
- Social media can serve as channels to call for emotional and material support for undocumented migrant workers in diaspora when official channels of support are not available due to their disadvantaged status. The experience of UVMWs shows that many feel that they cannot seek official support, even when they are not in the wrong, such as when they are victims of traffic accidents or unjust treatment by employers. Through the online platform, UVMWs can be informed of their rights in specific issues and circumstances.
- Social media can mitigate the sense of marginalization felt by disadvantaged communities because of the ever present sense of interconnectedness established by these platforms which allow for them to share, discuss and seek information about matters that directly concern their circumstances. UVMWs have been seen to express frustration online at not being able to find employment, being arrested and extorted, and even seeking advice on how to deal with police and immigration officers in difficult situations. Therefore, social media can provide a niche for community members to discuss and share matters pertaining specifically to their circumstances, even matters that would be considered as illegal under the law governing their work and stay in the country.
- Social media can help empower the community by allowing certain individuals with the ability and interest to have a platform to promulgate useful information and to galvanize

members to act on behalf of one another, especially in times of crisis. Although most of the UVMWs focus on making a living, there are a number of individuals who are also concerned with the well-being of the community and make an effort to serve the community in various ways.

- Community and religious leaders who are not able to exercise physical presence to the community in diaspora because of social, legal, geographical and other logistical reasons can be present to the community by exercising online presence. This presence was especially important in the Covid-19 pandemic because of multiple restrictions enforced as well as encouraged in order to help control the spread of the virus. Fr. Joseph Nguyen Manh Ha, a Dominican priest who serves the UVMW Catholic community in Bangkok Archdiocese turned to social media to broadcast online Masses during the pandemic because churches in Thailand were forced to shutter their doors. Since then, Fr. Ha has also begun to upload weekly homilies onto the Lien Hiep Facebook page to extend his presence online. The pandemic demonstrated how essential social media was to the work of social and religious leaders who could only be present to those under their care through the internet medium.
- Research into the reality of disadvantaged communities, especially those in diaspora, in the present era must not disregard social media as a source of inside information into the experience, the struggles, and the coping strategies of each particular group. Although in the day to day events, social media demonstrates itself to have an important role, the degree of importance of social media is much higher in times of crisis where information and various forms of support are needed in an urgent manner.
- While social media has proven to potentially be a powerful tool to enhance the life of young UVMWs, there are multiple dangers associated with social media for this community when the young people do not receive adequate guidance for prudent use of and engagement with social media, when it is abused to attack others, when it becomes a channel to spread untruths and inaccurate information. Like young people anywhere, the use of social media for personal benefit and progress must include adequate supervision and guidance from figures of authority. This lack of moral and authoritative presence by adults among young Vietnamese migrants in Thailand (and perhaps elsewhere) is an important issue that should be addressed by religious and social leaders.

In conclusion, social media has become an integral part of modern life; however, the nature of how it is used varies depending on the context. Although the primary purpose to stay interconnected with others is fundamental to the idea of social media, the particular ways in which the medium serves each group and individual is greatly influenced by the social, economic, cultural and religious circumstances in which each group or individual find themselves. In the case of young UVMWs in Thailand, social media, particularly Facebook and its Messenger application can be perceived as a means for mitigation of marginalization, not merely a platform to be social or stay connected with family and friends. Realizing the potential of social media as means for mitigation of marginalization can be of great benefit to members of the community, especially activists, social and religious leaders who have the interest and the well-being of the disadvantaged group in mind.