

Social Media and Undocumented Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Thailand during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This essay recounts the experience of marginalization of undocumented Vietnamese migrant workers (UVMWs) in Thailand, which intensified during the COVID-19 due to their status and difficulties with language. This reality greatly limited access to information and services available to Thai citizens. Facing these challenges, UVMWs turned to social media for information and support from within the community. The pandemic experience highlights the role of social media in the life of marginalized groups and communities in society in providing a niche for sharing information and experiences as well as mobilizing assistance from within the community itself.

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 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 who 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 the hospital fees having received enough donations from people who saw my post on social media and also a 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 (UVMWs) in Thailand used social media in order to deal with and mitigate the experience of marginalization and hardship during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as in their everyday life. It also demonstrates how an individual like myself who accompanies this community relies on social media to support them on an ongoing basis, but especially during times of crisis. This essay recounts the experience of marginalization that UVMWs experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and how social media has played a role in mitigating the negative experience of UVMWs as a disadvantaged and marginalized group in Thailand.

2. Marginalization during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Thailand is a country that thrives on its tourism industry, so it was not a surprise that the coronavirus made its first appearance in the Kingdom by way of a tourist from Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, the original epicenter of the pandemic. After the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the novel coronavirus was the cause of respiratory illness on 12 January 2020, Thailand had the first confirmed case outside of China. It came as no surprise since the WHO had already issued a statement on 10 January warning other countries to expect the virus to spread beyond the Chinese borders (Cheung 2020). However, in the months of January and February, the number of people discovered to be infected was relatively low with only several dozen cases (Reuters 2020). The threat of the pandemic became more imminent in Thailand with the recording of the first death on 1 March. As more cases were detected, local officials began to announce the cancellation of events and festivals including those associated with Thailand's biggest annual celebration of Songkran (Water Festival) scheduled for mid-April (Boyle 2020). March saw the beginning of more local infections including a breakout involving Lumpini Boxing Stadium, which resulted in dozens of cases. The increase in infection rate led national and local officials to order the closing of schools (The Nation 2020), entertainment venues such as bars, nightclubs and massage shops for 14 days in order to deal with the climbing infection numbers (Judd 2020). On 18 March, Thailand's neighboring country of Laos announced the closing of immigration checkpoints bordering the two countries (The Nation Thailand 2020a). Thailand, on its part, announced that it would close the immigration checkpoints along the Thai-Malaysia border (Garda World 2020). In the subsequent days, the immigration checkpoints between Thailand and Myanmar (Chongcharoen and Satyaem 2020) and Thailand and Cambodia would be closed as well (Satusayang 2020). In the midst of this, on 22 March, Thailand reported its largest daily jump of new cases at that time, 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 as well as an impending lockdown, migrant workers confronted an extremely difficult situation. 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 neighboring mainland Southeast Asian nations, the escalating crisis saw an exodus of migrant workers to their home countries where at the time, the pandemic was much less serious. 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 (Dau 2020). It was not until 24 March that

Laos confirmed its first two cases of the virus (Kang 2020). 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.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began to escalate in mid-March, UVMWs were caught in a dilemma. Many had recently returned to Thailand after the Lunar New Year holidays in their country, hoping to work and save up. However, before they could even find work or receive their first month's earnings, businesses were forced to close and the country was getting ready to go into lockdown. As airlines cancelled international flights and border immigration checkpoints also prepared to close, they had to make a choice of whether to stay and risk having their one-month visa expire. Usually, Vietnamese extend their stay by going on visa-runs to Thailand's neighboring countries and re-entering the country with a fresh 30-day stamp. 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 were right to worry about what consequences awaited them if their documents expired.

Another cause for anxiety for Vietnamese was not being fully informed of 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 a good grasp of formal Thai language. Few follow the Thai-language news outlets, and most do not possess enough fluency in the language 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 for which they could not easily get answers due to the lack of language proficiency. Others were concerned about what services the Thai government would extend to them in case 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 heading for their homeland. 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 onsite were allowing people to exit and enter on a day-to-day basis only at a certain location. Therefore, most were heading toward the border on either very short notice or with the single hope that the checkpoint would still be open for them to exit the next day. In these respects, there was no official channel of information that they could depend on.

A number of UVMWs 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. Many bought tickets for flights that would eventually be cancelled. In the end, thousands of Vietnamese managed to leave Thailand before the land immigration checkpoints as well as the airports were completely closed. On 26 March, the Kingdom went into lockdown as part of its state of emergency declaration with a nighttime curfew imposed nationally. UVMWs 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.

Hardship during the pandemic was not only the experience of UVMWs. Thai people also faced tremendous challenges. However, Thai citizens had the benefit of living in their own country, and could receive various types of relief measures from the government and free medical care. On the other hand, UVMWs had none of these channels or 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. In early April, when the lockdown had been in effect for nearly two weeks, other countries such as Japan and Cambodia had already announced amnesty for foreigners stuck in the country, but the Thai government was still considering whether or not to do the same. During late March and early April, foreigners whose visas were about to expire had to go to their respective embassies in order to obtain a letter confirming their inability to return home. After that, they were to take the letter to the immigration office in order to obtain an extension of up to 30 days for their stay in the Kingdom. This requirement was a great inconvenience for foreigners and for Vietnamese migrants in particular. For a Vietnamese living in Bangkok, all the expenses combined to get the extension would amount to 120–140 USD, a large sum in the midst of a difficult time. Unbelievably, all of this hassle was taking place at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. Foreigners were flocking to immigration offices in order to get their documents stamped, while everyone was 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 people to congregate in large numbers at immigration offices was dangerous for both the foreigners and the immigration officers, and decided to adopt an amnesty measure on 8 April (Fairfield 2020) that would eventually be extended several more times as the pandemic went 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 foreigners being detained in an immigration center in the province of Songkhla, southern Thailand, for illegal entry into the country. Although the majority came from Myanmar, there were also three Vietnamese nationals among the detained (Bangprapa 2020). Despite officials tracing the infection cluster to an immigration officer who worked at the Sadao border checkpoint (Khaosod English 2020), on social media many Thai people upset with a spike in the number of cases after several weeks of a downward trend accused the “aliens” 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. Many seemed to be unaware that at that time in Vietnam, the rate of infection was much lower than that in Thailand with no deaths thus far due to COVID-19. Vietnamese citizens, of course, received free treatment. Unlike Thailand, foreigners in Vietnam did not have to pay for COVID-19 tests or quarantine (Bliss Saigon 2020). In Thailand, they would have to bankroll their treatment, which could cost hundreds of thousands of THB. This, however, did not stop many Thai people from accusing these undocumented people of trying to take advantage of the system, a sentiment that intensified when a second batch of 18 detainees from the same center were reported infected for the virus on 4 May—on a day when no Thai was reported infected (The Nation Thailand 2020b). No one seemed

to sympathize with the fact that the cluster most likely occurred because the foreigners were being detained in 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” (Fortify Rights 2020).

The episode involving the infection cluster in the Songkhla ICD center illustrates to a certain extent the attitude that Thai people have toward foreign migrants, among the undocumented UVMWs. The factors that create a sense of marginalization are intensified in situations where the interests and well-being of Thai people are considered of priority or where the interests of foreigners are perceived as in conflict with those of the Thai 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.

3. 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 often cope with social marginalization by turning to social media. Among the platforms, Facebook is the most popular one in both Vietnam and Thailand. As of 2021, there were over 48.8 million Facebook users in Vietnam out of a total population of 95 million. Vietnam ranks 7th in the world in terms of the number of Facebook users. Most Facebook users in Vietnam are young, ranging in age from 18 to 34 years (Statista 2021a). In Thailand, there are 54.57 million users out of the 70 million population (Statista 2021b). UVMWs in Thailand overwhelmingly choose Facebook as their platform of choice. One would be hard-pressed to find any UVMW without a Facebook account. Because UVMWs work both day and night shifts depending on the type of employment, one finds them online every hour of the day.

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 and particularly essential for young parents who have left their children in the care of grandparents and relatives at home. 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) has over 100,000 members and is the largest group of this kind. 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 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 is 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 the 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 on various forums, which were then shared by many members leading to calls by a number of outspoken members to boycott the company. Facing bad online publicity, CPS responded by organizing a meeting with popular Facebook page administrators and Vietnamese workers on 31 August 2019 in order to clarify misunderstandings and 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 its newly created page.

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. For Catholic UVMWs, having access to the church and sacraments in their native language is a source of tremendous 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 inability 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 be most clearly seen at the 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. Therefore, at the time of crisis, social media becomes the primary channel for UVMWs to communicate with one another in order to seek support and assistance. Words of condolence, fundraising efforts and suggestions on how to deal with the matter are all communicated via social media. Such fundraising efforts can yield significant assistance depending on the severity of the 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.

4. Use of Social Media to Mitigate Marginalization 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 and 25 March, one source of information would say that immigration checkpoints were closed while another would declare that they were still open. Regarding visa extensions, before the official announcement of amnesty took place, there was enormous conflicting information as well. Some sources maintained that all foreigners must go to the immigration office in order to extend their stay in the Kingdom, while others insisted 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 issue caused 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 Kingdom.

It was during this time that my active presence on social media was of great service to UVMWs. As a Catholic priest, educator and as someone who has engaged in spiritual and social support for UVMWs in Thailand for 14 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, kept in contact with the Vietnamese Embassy in Thailand, and was 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 it to the Vietnamese, many of whom declared that until they saw it on my page, they would not believe anything that appeared 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.” 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, including accidents, sickness and death, without much recourse for help. In all these instances, I was contacted via social media for various kinds of support as well as financial assistance. When they turned to me, I would turn to social media to seek help, as I had often done 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, often facilitated by social media.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the experience of UVMWs in Thailand and the role of social media in their lives, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and other times of crisis, following are the salient points:

First, social media can serve as a platform where migrant communities in diaspora can turn to for information that most concerns 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 effective in urgent matters because information can be relayed much faster and with a wider reach among the target group.

Second, social media can serve as channels to find 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 support from official entities, even when they are victims of traffic accidents or exploitation. Through the online platform, UVMWs can be informed of their rights in specific issues and circumstances.

Third, 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 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 by corrupt officials, 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 matters pertaining specifically to their circumstances, even topics that would be considered illegal under the law governing their work and stay in the country.

Fourth, 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 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.

Fifth, 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 barriers 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 community in Bangkok Archdiocese turned to social media to broadcast online Masses during the pandemic because churches were forced to shutter their doors. 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.

Finally, research into the reality of disadvantaged communities, especially those in diaspora, in the present era must not disregard social media as a source of information into the

experience, the struggles and the coping strategies of each particular group. Although in 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.

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 are greatly influenced by the social, economic, cultural and religious circumstances in which groups or individuals find themselves. In the case of 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. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that in times of crisis, the experience of marginalization can be intensified because priorities are given to other more privileged groups/individuals. Disadvantaged groups may even be portrayed or perceived as placing extra burdens on society or even the reason making an already bad situation worse. Realizing the potential of social media as a 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.

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