

Villainized subjects in the first-wave COVID-19 crisis in English online news in Thailand

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Abstract

This paper discusses the narrative construction of “villains” in COVID-19 Thai online news, proposing that media portrayals of subjects related to COVID-19 were negatively framed as villains through narrative framing and biased characterization. A close critical reading method, aided by Vladimir Propp’s narratological model and Michel Foucault’s theoretical conceptions of power and knowledge, is used in the analysis of the texts. The article includes the definition of ‘villains’, the villainization process, and the villainized subjects in COVID-19 English online news during the first wave crisis in Thailand in the first half of 2020. By doing so, this paper aims to provide a clearer understanding of past perspectives on the pandemic and its moral repercussions for Thai society in order to strengthen communication and response strategies when interacting with COVID-19 subjects and victims of future pandemics.

Keywords Villains, villainization, COVID-19, protagonist, antagonist

1. Introduction

Traditionally, critical analysis of villainous characters can be found primarily in literary and narrative studies. Nevertheless, closer examination reveals that narrative construction and analysis extend beyond fiction, including textual analysis of non-fictional works, such as online media articles and documentaries. Furthermore, despite the non-fictional nature of texts that appeared in Thai newspaper headlines and articles during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are demonstrable narrative structures that actively shaped the characterization and treatment of the subjects in those texts, differing significantly from those before the COVID crisis.

Regarding the reasons for choosing the coronavirus(which emerged in late 2019 and has since receded to manageable levels), the researcher believes the great impact of the virus at almost all levels of societies worldwide, has fundamentally altered people's thoughts and values on a global scale. In response to the pandemic, radically new sets of rules and guidelines emerged, including changed circumstances that redefined 'good' and 'bad' citizens. Thus, behavioral patterns during such crises shifted, with some individuals rebranded as 'heroes' (frequently referring to medical professionals), and 'villains, often referring to those whose behaviors contradicted officially mandated health guidelines or those believed to carry enhanced risk of spreading the virus, invidiously labeled 'Super Spreaders', suggesting that both groups could potentially harm society.

The portrayal of COVID-19 as a new and practically unprecedented threat to humanity began in 2019. Notably, the 'villainous' aspect of the virus was dramatically underscored by its invisible nature as an airborne pathogen, thereby rendering it a hidden danger far more difficult to interpret than a concrete threat people could clearly identify and respond to. Additional villainized subjects, varying from country to country, were subsequently constructed through evolving media narratives. For example, in the United States, an online article from *The Conversation* examines the importance and implication of naming in the case of President Donald Trump, who initially blamed China for the virus, thereby labeling the virus "Chinese" (Viala-Gaudefroy, 2020). The social, political, and economic implications of Trump's painting China as a "villain" were devastatingly powerful. As a direct consequence of former President Trump's public statement in the media, many Asian ethnicities in the US and elsewhere have been racially targeted as carriers of biological contamination. The degradation of public discourse and the documented uptick of violence against Asian Americans in the aftermath of these negatively framed and unproven accusations by a sitting president justifies why the "villain" issue should be examined in closer detail, especially in relation to analogous situations

in Thailand. Additionally, even setting aside the issue of racial prejudice against Asian Americans writ large, another villain figure related to the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States is the “Karen” figure. An article in *The Atlantic* mentions the “defining essence” of a “Karen” from Heather Suzanne Woods (a meme researcher and professor at Kansas State University) that individuals named Karen display characteristics of “entitlement, selfishness, and a desire to complain” (Tiffany, 2020). Tiffany goes on to describe the emergence of the ‘Karen meme during COVID-19 as follows: “‘Karen’ has been adopted as a shorthand to call out a vocal minority of middle-aged white women who are opposed to social distancing, out of either ignorance or ruthless self-interest.”

Thailand, on the other hand, lacks a clear depiction of villains besides the virus itself. Unlike the “Karen” figure in America, the perpetrators (including scapegoats) are depicted as groups of people rather than individuals, to whom attention and social blame vary from one dramatic event to the next, depending on shifting trends in media output and public response on social media and other accessible platforms. Therefore, a systematic analysis of the narrative structures and the villainy characterization is a potentially useful tool to identify and analyze the lexical and narrative patterns of the figures targeted in relation to the virus, including the results and consequences of the villain construction in the text.

To illustrate, a refusal to self-quarantine for fourteen days by a returned illegal Thai immigrant from South Korea generated widespread concern among the Thai public when a picture of the outing with their family at a local barbecue restaurant was broadcasted across social media. A subsequent “witch-hunt” occurred after exposing the name and other personal information of the person became public knowledge: leading to a wave of threats, insults, and public shaming online until they publicly apologized later. Ironically, another group that provoked outrage among Thais were the alleged ‘super spreaders’ arising from two major clusters that ignited the virus in Thailand, which then rapidly spread from person to person from within the country instead of from individuals arriving from abroad. This incident arose from the infected attendees of a boxing match at Lumpini Boxing Stadium on February 4 and partygoers in the Thonglor area between February 27 and 29, 2020. During health officials’ investigation process, speculation about the infected spread quickly online, and their behaviors were widely displayed and scrutinized across the digital sphere. Infected people, such as Matthew Deane MC at the event) apologized publicly and raised people’s awareness of the virus, bringing him praise from the public, while the organization holding the event was harshly criticized for not having canceled the event in light of the circumstances.

Another illuminating case study that tackles the research question at the heart of this paper involves an incident at Suvarnabhumi Airport that occurred on April 3 due to miscommunication between the airport authority and 158 passengers who were technically supposed to be quarantined in a state facility for 14 days. Consequently, major headline news all pointed in the same direction: the passengers' refusal to be quarantined indicated an intent to purposely break the law, thus being painted as "villains." However, the truth was revealed later: in fact, they had been officially released to quarantine themselves at home. Examples like these reveal the power of popular media as an institution, and the concomitant responsibility to convey objective 'truth' and 'knowledge' to the public. certain perspectives of the media itself or the author through words Furthermore, grouping people as evaders without clear evidence or through a negatively biased viewpoint of the law disregards the individuals' backgrounds and moral intentions.

There are a number of reasons why it is important to conduct comprehensive studies on subjects who were vilified during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand's English online news. Firstly, gaining insight into how individuals or groups are presented as villains in the media during a public crisis can help reflect social attitudes and ideals. This information can be used to create more effective communication plans and strategies for handling future crises. Second, examining how villains are portrayed in the context of a pandemic such as COVID-19 offers insight into questions of social subjectivity, power relationships, and the propagation of knowledge. Through an analysis of the construction and characterization of villains in media narratives, this research seeks to reveal underlying societal norms and attitudes toward marginalized groups during times of crisis, particularly during the initial phases of the situation when there is a discernible gap in perceived information and the truth about the issue at hand.

Despite an abundance of available literature on the COVID-19 epidemic, there remains a dearth of hard data and critical analysis regarding public portrayals of villainous characters, specifically in the Thai media context during the pandemic's initial wave. Studies that have already been conducted have focused on a range of pandemic-related issues, including medical reactions, public health initiatives, and social effects. However, little is known about how 'villains' are created in news stories. By offering a thorough examination of how particular people or groups were portrayed as villains in Thai English-language online news during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study seeks to close this knowledge gap, filling a research vacuum and advancing knowledge of the power dynamics and societal dynamics at work during global public health emergencies.

These underlying messages and knowledge gaps from the case studies utilized in this paper were condensed into news headlines reported through specific perspectives, which, upon analysis, reveal patterns that can be interpreted through narrative and characterization analysis. To unpack these case studies, the research aims to identify and analyze the construction of villainized subjects in Thailand's COVID-19 first wave. The primary research hypothesis is that from the headlines' texts, clearly invidious lexical and narrative patterns emerge implicitly and explicitly implying that the characters who appeared in the news are not inherently villainous by their actions but rather by how their actions are interpreted, constructed, and reported within the broader discourse of global and national official media. In addition, interrogating the narrative construction surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher aims to formulate a thematic coding of headline samples accompanied by a close reading method with frameworks by Vladimir Propp's terms and functions of villains and Michel Foucault's conception of discourse as knowledge and power, shedding light on the ever-shifting characterization of villains during the COVID-19 crisis.

The study examining the representation of antagonists in English web news in Thailand amidst the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic is anticipated to produce several noteworthy benefits. This study aims to uncover the precise language and narrative tactics employed by mainstream media narratives to depict and construct villains in times of crisis. One significant advantage is clarifying the root causes of the manifestation of social attitudes and ideals. Analyzing the process of portraying individuals or groups as villains could potentially reveal deep-seated cultural prejudices, stigmas, and ethical principles that were brought to the forefront during the recent pandemic. Acquiring this comprehension is essential to comprehending the societal framework and perspectives during periods of significant crisis. Ideally, the findings from this research will enhance future crisis communication tactics. By interpreting the impact of media representation on public perception, policymakers, and communicators can create messages that reduce stigmatization and misinformation. This awareness, in turn, would result in more efficient and empathetic communication during public health crises. Furthermore, the study will investigate the correlation between power, knowledge, and subjectivity in media narratives by employing the theories of Michel Foucault. This study aims to enhance comprehension of how media influences public discourse and perspectives during crises, addressing a research gap in the literature about the process of portraying villains in Thai English-language news during the initial stages of the COVID-19 outbreak. Furthermore, the study will examine and evaluate lexical and narrative trends in news headlines, shedding light on the role of media language in shaping the portrayal of antagonists.

Specific instances in Thailand will be examined in detail, in the form of documented actual case studies, including the impact of media on public attitudes and behaviors in the context of a serious health crisis. The results will provide guidance for policy suggestions on media regulation and crisis management, guaranteeing conscientious and equitable reporting in forthcoming crises. Furthermore, this research will function as a teaching tool for diverse academic disciplines including media studies, communication, sociology, and public health.

Research Objective

To study the construction and characterization of villainized subjects during the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis in Thai Online News in English and its implications on the relationship between power, knowledge, and subjectivity within a Thai cultural context.

2. Research Questions

Accordingly, the research questions are as follows:

- 1) How were subjects targeted in the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis constructed and characterized as villains in the English-written online news in Thailand?
- 2) What are the implications of the villainization process of COVID-19 and its subjects with the notions of power, knowledge, and subjectivity within the Thai context?

3. Literature Review and Key Terms

Three terms will be discussed to clarify definitions and to discuss related literature and theoretical frameworks: First Wave, Villain, and Subjects.

First Wave

The term ‘first wave’ as employed in this paper refers to the initial domestic outbreak of coronavirus in Thailand between March and May 2020. The first case of domestic infection that marked the wider public’s awareness of the first wave of the coronavirus crisis started with boxing matches and nightclubs in Bangkok in March 2020. Subsequently, the scope of the infection rapidly expanded to 68 provinces, resulting in curfews, a national lockdown, and a 14-day quarantine requirement for international travelers imposed in April 2020, until business resumed as usual at the end of the lockdown in May 2020 (Rajatanavin et al., 2021).

Villain and Villainization

Generally, villains, in the traditional sense used in folklore studies, are associated with “antagonists” and “enemies.” In the broadest sense of the term, they refer to key characters that oppose the hero’s journey to his goal with malicious intent. The antagonist is used as the antonym for the protagonist or hero, although they do not necessarily make immoral decisions

or have harmful intentions toward the protagonist, rather their primary objectives are fundamentally oppositional.

Other researchers have also touched on negative societal reactions and attitudes towards marginalized subjects during the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, Myanmar workers have been discriminated against and politically framed in opposition to nationalistic viewpoints on social media regarding the COVID-19 pandemic (Dounghummes et al., 2023). The study uses an Othering Online Discourse (OOD) framework to analyze comments made by Thai netizens on the three most popular Facebook news pages, revealing various forms of othering discourse, including ad hominem attacks, reinforcements of preexisting social stigmas, victim-playing, and elimination through malice. The study highlights the significant impact of misleading media coverage on triggering negative online reactions towards migrants, further hindering their already fraught assimilation into Thai society. Another study shows similar treatment of migrant workers by the Thai government: in “Prophylactic Nationalism COVID-19 in Thai Public Health Discourse” (Suwanwattana, 2022). state officials used prophylactic nationalism in its COVID-19 response, deploying nationalistic rhetoric that focused on Thailand's history as a ‘non-colonized’ nation. The government used slogans like "Stay home, stop germs, for the nation " and "Together as Thais, we build the nation, we withstand COVID-19" to invoke nationalist themes of unity and patriotic self-sacrifice. The visual imagery of the prophylactic campaigns also drew on nationalistic and militaristic tropes. However, the transnational nature of the pandemic challenged official strategy, as outbreaks linked to migrant workers from neighboring countries cast unwanted light upon the country's porous borders and widespread reliance on transnational labor. Apart from Myanmar migrant workers, Chinese tourists have also been subjected to enhanced scrutiny during the COVID-19 pandemic. “Brothers or “Others”? Attitudes of Thais Towards Chinese Tourists During COVID-19” explores Thai attitudes towards Chinese tourists during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lin et al., 2021). Researchers used social exchange theory (SET) and intergroup contact theory (ICT) to examine the factors shaping the formation of these discriminatory attitudes. Negative portrayals were based on perceived ‘uncivilized’ behaviors, whilst positive attitudes were influenced by continuous service providers. Interestingly, Thais who filled service sector roles for Chinese tourists were inadvertent victims of official calls to temper sentiments of amiability in the name of national pride.

In addition, social sentiments towards particular subjects related to COVID-19 at the beginning were significantly affected by the values invoked by mass media, such as society and government, at the time, as the study “Evolution of COVID-19 Tweets about Southeast Asian

Countries: Topic Modelling and Sentiment Analyses” indicates (Mathayomchan et al., 2023). The paper analyzes Twitter discourse across ten Southeast Asian countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on common topics, sentiments, and emotional tenor. The study collected and processed 115,553 tweets, using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to identify 12 main topics. Sentiments varied across countries, with the dominant emotions being fear and trust. Other prevalent emotions included anticipation, sadness, anger, and surprise. The findings of this study add to understanding public discourse and sentiment during crises, particularly in SEA countries, suggesting that countries should carefully monitor social media discourse to manage public sentiment and effectively counter misinformation. Key actions for public health and public relations officials include establishing digital infoveillance systems, detecting narrative changes, and implementing appropriate responses. This research highlights the growing influence of social media in shaping public perceptions and sentiments toward countries and marginalized groups during pandemics and other major crises.

As for the focus of this study on villains, Vladimir Propp’s expertise in character theory and narrative structure will be used. Propp was a folklorist and narrative scholar whose thorough study of Russian folktales established patterned archetypes for characters, including villains (Wagner, 1968). His work paved the way for further studies of narrative plots and structures, such as the application of Propp’s Morphology of the Folktale to Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (Lahlou, 2017) and the structural pattern of the ancient Greek romances (Ruiz-Montero, 1981). As a result, Propp’s structuralism (especially in plot structure and characterization) extends beyond folklore studies into film studies. For example, “A Structure of Antipathy: Constructing the Villain in Narrative Film” provides in-depth and insightful discussions of villains in films and how films provoke the audiences’ condemnation of the villains (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2019).

Vladimir Propp’s functions of *dramatis personae* in his book, *Morphology of the Folktale*, are used to explain the definition, categorization, and function of villains in news narratives.

Subjects

The terms ‘subject’ and ‘subjectivity’ derive from the theories of Michel Foucault, a French philosopher. Foucault’s notion of power, knowledge, and subjectivity is ideally suited to illustrate the complex relationship between power, knowledge, and subjectivity. Moreover, his definition and characterization of “normalization” can help clarify the notion of villainization concerning the COVID-19 subjects in Thailand.

Foucault argues that normalization is "a system of finely gradated and measurable intervals in which individuals can be distributed around a norm—a norm that both organizes and is the result of this controlled distribution" (1984, p. 20). In this fashion, normalization is simultaneously an agent and an object of the process of establishing normative behaviors among individuals within a given community. In addition, the byproduct of establishing what is deemed 'normal' in society is the anomaly. Applying these frameworks can easily lead to state-sanctioned attempts to control the anomalous agents. The process involved in 'extracting' the anomalies from the social body involves systematic creation, classification, and control (Foucault, 1984, p. 21).

Considering the impact of the government's controlling narrative during the COVID-19 pandemic, a study entitled "Negotiating trust through COVID-19 press briefings: A multimodal analysis" examines how a combination of spoken and visual elements in televised COVID-19 press briefings enables policymakers to regain and maintain public trust after failures at the broader organizational level (Bunnag & Chaemsaitong, 2024). It does so by countering negative narratives that undermine the public's perception of their competence, integrity, and goodwill and alternatively highlighting positive aspects related to these qualities. Viewed through this lens, it appears that these mediated multimodal speeches are mostly used by the government for political advantage: blaming others for problems with surveillance while exaggerating their own actions without concretely addressing the real issues from a public health standpoint. This trust repair practice aims to present the pandemic as first an external biosecurity threat and then as a natural and predictable feature of an infectious disease that can be sustainably managed. It relies heavily on creating a division between "us" and "them," ultimately undermining effective public health goals and coordinated efforts to control the spread of the virus over the long term.

Apart from Michel Foucault, other scholars whose works on power and social theory are equally relevant, including Derrida's deconstruction method and Durkheim's examination of social integration. However, Foucault's two ideologies—power/knowledge, and truth/subjectivity—are sufficiently flexible to approach the COVID-19 villain phenomenon in the Thai context, given that his thought-provoking mode of discourse analysis is more than an abstract concept but less than an unalterable theory only applicable to in particular times and contexts.

The notion of subjectivity, touching briefly on Foucault's discussion of subjectivity and power, could help deconstruct the complex representation of power and knowledge and identify their relationships. Furthermore, the narratology study of villains' creation originated from

folklore in Vladimir Propp's narratological model, used to analyze depictions and characterizations of villainous characters in the text through a close-reading method. The textual analysis process, therefore, involves identifying the villain presented in the text, explaining why it exists and how it is constructed, and illuminating its possible consequences within a broader (non-fictional) context.

Incidentally, it is not the researcher's intention to personally judge, blame, or objectify specific groups of people by giving them negative connotations. The definition and functions of the term "villain(s)" in the paper will be discussed based on a close reading of the texts themselves. Related subjects surrounding the concept of villain here are, therefore, not intrinsically 'good' or 'bad'. The inherent ambiguity and difficulty of defining and evaluating villainy is reflected in the following excerpt from Heit's *Essay on Evil in Popular Media*:

"But perhaps evil simply cannot be explained, and this inexplicability may be what defines evil itself. Perhaps only what is good may be capable of genuine explanation or justification. Hence evil by its very definition should not make sense; it is in fact our frustration with its inexplicability and nonsensicality that incites us to struggle against it in an effort to eliminate it." (2011)

4. Methodology

The qualitative research methodology employed in this research is content analysis based on a close reading technique predominantly used in literary studies. Michel Foucault's theory of power and knowledge will be used to magnify and interpret the relationship between knowledge and power and how it constitutes the definition of subjectivity in relation to law-abiding citizens and their publicly designated 'villain' counterparts. Also, the purpose of conducting qualitative research as opposed to quantitative research using calculated referential statistics through a corpus-based analysis is intended to highlight the villainization process and its implications at both the narrative and conceptual levels.

Manual coding and thematic analysis were used in the primary stage of data collection: newspaper headlines regarding COVID-19 were collected from the official websites of *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* regarding major events starting from January 2020 to May 2020. These publications are the two biggest publishers of English-written newspapers in Thailand. With their influence extended to online news in digital form, the texts analyzed in the research are based mainly on the newspapers' websites instead of the physical paper for two reasons: they routinely address the same current events, and the precipitous decline in paper-based news publishing has given way to digital news platforms, which are easily accessible to the public.

In addition, the criteria for selecting the two sources are their popularity, the online presence of the news sources, and the number of years in circulation. The *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* are the two highest-ranking daily newspapers in English that fit all the required categories. *Bangkok Post* was established in 1946, while *The Nation* was founded in 1971, and in recent years both newspapers have moved systemically their main media platforms from a physical format to the digital sphere. In addition, choosing English-language newspapers instead of translating Thai media outlets offers an ideal opportunity for an alternative perspective reflecting the impact of language modes and news customs, as well as expectations from targeted customers, particularly English speakers living in Thailand or those living but habitually following the Thai news. Thus, thematic analysis is used in the selection criteria of the data based on the negative impacts of COVID-19 and its related villainized subjects. The period covers events starting from the time before COVID-19 spread from person to person in the country to June 2020, after the second phase of lockdown relaxations nationwide.

The data collection of headlines regarding COVID-19 collected from the official websites of *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* regarding major COVID-19 events starting from January 2020 to May 2020 consists of 125 entries. Keywords with negative connotations will then be extracted from the COVID-19-related headlines, and portrayals of villainized subjects will be interpreted from the relevant data. The inclusion criteria are the sources and dates of the headlines (*Bangkok Post* and *the Nation* official websites between January and May 2020), the related topics (COVID-19 or Corona Virus related), full-text headlines containing negative detonations and connotations, keywords suggesting relevance to COVID-19 and negative perceptions, and perceived villains from the headlines. It should be noted that the headlines' frequency of appearances does not impact the inclusion of the data.

The result is five subjects under two themes: the villains abroad and the villains within. The cases include news headlines relating to the Chinese tourist ban, the illegal Thai immigrants from South Korea, the 'Super Spreaders' from Lumpini boxing stadium and Thonglor, the passengers from abroad who allegedly evaded Suvarnabhumi Airport's authority from being admitted to the state quarantine, the curfew breakers, and the hoarders and raiders of the Pantries of Sharing.

5. Results

After data collection and applying the thematic analysis method, the researcher has assembled a table below that shows the events' timeline and corresponding villain roles,

alongside the sampled headlines from *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* during the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak in Thailand.

Table 1 Summary of data timeline and selected headlines

Theme: COVID-19 Villains

Period and Headlines	Villainized Subjects
The Villains Abroad	
30 January 2020: <i>Chinese no longer welcome as coronavirus fear grips world</i> (Bloomberg News, 2020) 17 March 2020: <i>US, China play coronavirus blame game</i> (AFP, 2020)	Chinese Tourists, “Chinese” Virus
4 March 2020: ‘ <i>Little ghosts</i> ’ spark virus fears (Post Reporters, 2020a) 5 March 2020: <i>Challenge of contagion</i> (Editorial, 2020) 6 March 2020: ‘ <i>Little ghost</i> ’ gets Chiang Mai spooked” (The Nation, 2020a)	“Little ghosts or Phi Noi”
The Villains Within	
20 March 2020: <i>Up to 500 boxing fans could be infected, undetected</i> (The Nation, 2020b)	The Super spreaders from Lumpini boxing stadium
5 April 2020: <i>Roundup of airport escapees begins</i> (Bangkok Post, 2020)	Passengers at Suvarnabhumi Airport who allegedly evaded authorities from entering the state quarantine
20 May 2020: <i>Youngsters land in hot soup over ‘fun’</i> (The Nation, 2020c)	Curfew Breakers

Period and Headlines	Villainized Subjects
30 May 2020: <i>30 teens held at birthday party</i> (Pupattanapong, 2020)	
11 May 2020: <i>Fierce Internet debate after Ubon Ratchathani family empties pantry meant for needy</i> (<i>The Nation</i> , 2020d) 13 May 2020: <i>Prayut lashes out at pantry raiders for abusing goodwill</i> (<i>Post Reporters</i> , 2020b) 19 May 2020: <i>'Ugly' pantry scenes expose a nation divided</i> (Achakulwisut, 2020)	the Hoarders and Raiders of the Pantries of Sharing

The data presented above spans an overview of portrayals of COVID-19 villains in different roles through various representations. Other than the COVID-19 virus itself, the shift of the COVID-19-related villain roles in Thailand radiated outward to inward, ranging from foreign to domestic subjects, from January to May 2020.

5.1 Chinese no longer welcome as coronavirus fear grips world, US, China play coronavirus blame game

The first section of the table, termed “The Villain Abroad,” refers to subjects outside Thailand whose impact was still outside the country. The researcher pinpointed China and Chinese-related human subjects as one of the initial groups to be given villain roles, portrayed by both newspapers as one of the first threats from outside Thailand, with headlines starting from 16 January to February 2020. The cluster origin of the virus in Wuhan, China, became part of global geopolitics when objective scientific precaution was given the subjective exclusion treatment. The nationality of mainland Chinese, and subsequently other (non-Thai) citizens of Asian ethnicity, became the face of the villain.

The notion of racial discrimination relating to COVID-19 is partly explored in a journal article criticizing the visual presentation of people of Asian descent wearing masks in the popular press, potentially leading to racial antagonism (Batova, 2021). As a result, Chinese citizens became targets of other nations (including Europe and the United States) and were subject to heightened suspicion and even overt harassment due to their perceived affiliation with the virus. Both headlines highlight the early onset of the Coronavirus situation, in which fear and distrust permeated the sentiments of nations such as the US towards China’s infected citizens.

The headlines' negative connotations from the phrases “no longer welcome” and “blame game” suggest that motivations of exclusion do not include only scientific facts of whether the citizens of particular nations are infected or not but also raise questions of moral responsibility. To clarify, the dominant news narrative (with a primarily English-speaking readership) established antagonist/protagonist relationships, resulting in increased tensions in China, the United States, and worldwide. Thus, the perceived actions of individuals profiled in reputable media outlets ultimately obstructed public health efforts to return to a pandemic-free world, fostering instead a narrative focus on Chinese tourists as the sources of the continuing risk of the virus spreading and prolonging the pandemic indefinitely.

5.2 ‘Little ghosts’ spark virus fears; Challenge of contagion, ‘Little ghost’ gets Chiang Mai spooked

Media portrayals of threats from abroad did not stop at foreign subjects but also included Thais. During the height of the pandemic, the villain role was also extended to cover Thais living or working abroad who returned, particularly illegal migrant workers in South Korea referred to in the news as *Phi Noi* (little ghosts). Despite the seemingly endearing tenor of the term and the overall playful tone of the headline, the consequences in South Korea were quite serious, as was the public concern in Thailand. The article’s publication coincided with the period when South Korea’s number of COVID-19-infected people was reaching the thousands. As a result, there was a huge concern in Thailand over the return of these workers, as reported in *the Bangkok Post*’s editorial section: “Some prominent scholars are openly against this mass return, and many members of the public have not hesitated to discriminate” (Editorial, 2020). The opposition between Thais already dwelling within the country as the protagonists and returning Thai laborers as villains threatening the country’s ostensibly COVID-free status was set up in this way. Under harsh media scrutiny, the primary concern was not with the lack of medical preparedness since the directive for people traveling from South Korea to self-quarantine for 14 days had already been issued (albeit not legally binding at the time) but emphasized the compromised morality of the “little ghosts” themselves. The Chiang Mai case, in which a returnee from South Korea posted a photo of herself drinking alcohol in a pub, generated widespread panic and fear among locals and nationals alike because of the lack of trust in the subjects to follow health guidelines. Not strictly following the quarantine guidelines would have been viewed as permissible pre-COVID era, but the ‘new normal’ dictated fundamental changes in how people should live, in other words, a new normalization. In this way, if the situation had been viewed as a moral dilemma instead of a strictly public health issue, the fact that the woman had been tested and cleared of COVID-19

infection would have carried entirely different implications, encompassing the need for responsible behavior on behalf of the public at large as opposed to concentrating vitriol on a relatively small group of individuals recently returned from overseas. She later apologized to the public on the grounds of ignorance, as reported in the news (*The Nation*, 2020). However, the word “ignorance” was in quotation marks, conveying the literal meaning of a direct quotation and implicitly questioning the authenticity of her apology.

The threat of COVID-19 from within Thailand, shown in the second half of the table, revolves around native Thais already in the country. The portrayed villain, at first, corresponds with a notorious COVID-19 cluster incident, the case of the Lumpini Boxing Stadium. Later along the timeline, the portrayed villains become associated with the fears of causing regional clusters, analogous to the case of Suvarnabhumi Airport passengers and Curfew Breakers. Near the end of the first wave, when people are allowed to be outside, the portrayed villains shift from health-related subjects to economic-related subjects in the form of ‘selfish’ people who ‘raided’ the Sharing Pantry.

5.3 Up to 500 boxing fans could be infected, undetected

Despite the news of COVID-19 being reported since the beginning of 2020, the first COVID-19-related threat within the country originated at the Lumpini Boxing Stadium. *The Nation*’s headline, “Up to 500 boxing fans could be infected, undetected,” conveys a clear sense of urgency and incipient crisis, turning COVID-19 from a potentially containable disease into a pervasive threat spreading via the human Super Spreaders stalking invisibly amidst the populace. As a result, all individuals connected to the boxing stadium had the potential to infect their fellow citizens, or in the case of the organizer) were malevolent perpetrators intent on harming the public good. Hence, due to the contextual framing of these events in the news media and subsequently perpetuated via social media platforms, the villain status was assigned to specific ‘villainized’ individuals and groups.

The Royal Thai Army operates the Lumpini Boxing Stadium, and at the time, the image of the military-backed government was very problematic. As a result, the virus outbreak and its consequent cluster had taken place, and the people involved were targets of social condemnation.

5.4 Roundup of Airport Escapees Begins

As for the next case, the *Bangkok Post* published an article entitled “Roundup of airport escapees begins.” To provide context, it was the time when the country was on the verge of lockdown, and there was a time gap between when the law was issued by the Thai government and its actual application. As a result, a multitude of miscommunications occurred between

visitors who had already received permission from Thai embassies abroad and Immigration at Suvarnabhumi Airport. Since there were no clear guidelines in place regarding how to detain visitors from abroad, especially since the state quarantine measure for people overseas had not yet been finalized, there was ongoing confusion about where and how long the new arrivals had to be quarantined. Ultimately, some (but not all) of the passengers were allowed to go home and follow self-quarantine protocols. The problem was that the details of the negotiations had not been made public when the media became aware of the issue. Thus, the headline referred to the passengers as “escapees” and the authority’s “roundup” of them. In stark contrast to the facts, yet shaped by the power of narrative framing by presumably reliable media outlets, the passengers featured in the headlines were treated as convicts who sneakily and intentionally escaped the ‘prison’ of quarantine.

By branding the passengers as intentional lawbreakers lacking any concern for public wellbeing, other elements than facts from verified information sources were incorporated into the media narrative, resulting in a distortion of public perception. Mere days after the incident, following explanations from both the airport authorities and the passengers’ accounts on social media, it became clear that the passengers were mistakenly allowed to go home. Headlines of this nature reinforced the fear of Thailand breaking the bubble of no infection within the country outside the government’s control: a perspective that the authorities were deeply invested in maintaining. Therefore, the distorted image one could interpret from the situation is protecting the safety of the majority of people within the country, who were the protagonists going against the ‘evasive ignorant’ Thai passengers from abroad.

5.5 30 teens held at birthday party

After a full nationwide lockdown was imposed, including a night curfew and an emergency decree limiting the number of people gathering remained in place through May 2020. The incident could be considered insignificant and even barely illegal under normal circumstances, but a small selfish act such as hosting a birthday party among 30 teenagers became major news headlines during the COVID-19 pandemic. Certainly, partying was a reasonable cause of concern during a public health emergency involving a potentially life-threatening airborne pathogen. Nevertheless, the gravity of the action was vastly out of proportion relative to the degree of risk the incident in questions posed to society at large. Partygoers in the pre-COVID-19 era could be charged with petty offenses for causing noise and disturbances, with the penalty of a small fine. However, the authoritarian process of alienating and highlighting minor legal infractions by the authorities during COVID-19 could be observed through police actions and the reporting of the news headlines. The portrayal of selfish, careless

teenagers gathering and partying became a parable for immoral activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, setting a few dozen teenagers as villains posed against the tolerant, law-abiding citizens who were forgoing their happiness and livelihoods for the sake of the greater good. In addition, the imposition of a night curfew was presented as a way to limit night travelers in clubs or other night-related entertainments, debatably implying that night workers and travelers posed a higher risk than people who work and travel during the daytime.

5.6 Fierce Internet debate after Ubon Ratchathani family empties pantry meant for needy, Prayut lashes out at pantry raiders for abusing goodwill, ‘Ugly’ pantry scenes expose a nation divided

The idea of charity among people within communities helping low-income individuals emerged in the form of Sharing Pantries: tall cupboards with shelves and closed doors situated in communal space where people could either put in food, water, and household amenities or take the items they needed back to their houses. There were no clear rules regarding how much to give and take since the pantry-sharing idea was new at the time. Only common sense and social conscience dictated the norm. The question of what and how much should be put in or taken out was not discussed widely in the news headlines until conflicts began to occur and sociocultural lines were perceived to have been crossed. In one instance, some people started taking more than they should—a man and his three sons in the Ubon Ratchathani case. They emptied the sharing pantry, denying accessibility to other families in need who depended on the sharing pantry. The incident was widely criticized on the internet and divided the Thai public: one faction believed it was the family’s right to take as much as they could for their family members at home, and the other argued they were acting selfishly and lacked the compassion and common sense to leave necessities for others, causing regrets among those who had donated the goods. Prayut Chan-o-cha (Thailand’s Prime Minister at the time) ultimately denounced the Pantry Raiders for abusing public goodwill. This heated debate, once again incited by news reporting by major media outlets and debated on social media, indicates the power of the state authority to define the “norm” of the sharing pantry and to extract the ‘anomalies’ through the processes of creation, classification, and control, as Foucault suggests, portraying the selfish pantry raiders as villains against the charitable Thai protagonists.

6. Discussion

The depiction of villains in online news headlines at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic exposes complex power dynamics, societal stigmas, and narrative construction. It also demonstrates how much influence the media has in molding public opinions and potentially

marginalizing particular subjects. The media's role in creating antagonists during the COVID-19 issue is apparent in various contexts. Thailand depicted enemies that encompassed Chinese visitors, migrant workers returning from abroad, illegal immigrants, Super Spreaders, and curfew breakers. Dionne and Turkmen (2020) have observed that there is a global propensity to marginalize specific communities during pandemics, which aligns with the abovementioned findings. The study also highlights the way in which pandemics can worsen pre-existing social tensions and strengthen unfavorable preconceptions. This is particularly obvious in Thailand, where Chinese tourists and Myanmar laborers have experienced substantial stigmatization for years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. As for the Chinese subject, the depiction of Chinese visitors as potential carriers of viruses in Thai media corresponds with the conclusions of Lin, Kingminghae, and Mahasirithai (2021) regarding Thai perceptions of Chinese tourists. Their research emphasizes the extent to which the pandemic has exacerbated negative perceptions; rooted in perceived 'uncivilized' behavior. These examples highlight a more extensive pattern of racial prejudice and scapegoating. The portrayal of Chinese tourists as antagonists not only mirrors long-standing biases but also underscores the media's function in magnifying anxieties and xenophobic attitudes. Additionally, the analysis by Doungphummes, Saeheng, and Phanthaphoommee (2023) highlights a persistent trend of marginalization in Thai society when it comes to the treatment of Myanmar migrant workers throughout the pandemic. Their examination of internet communication illustrates how crises incite the perpetuation of otherness, resulting in the systemic defamation and marginalization of migratory workers. This framing aligns with Suwanwattana's (2022) notion of prophylactic nationalism, in which the Thai government routinely employs nationalist language in its public health communication to foster solidarity whilst subtly attributing the virus's transmission to foreign factors.

Regarding Foucault's theories on power, knowledge, and subjectivity, these concepts offer a valuable interpretive framework for comprehending these complex processes. The portrayal of antagonists in media narratives serves as a means of exerting political and socioeconomic influence, with the media acting as an establishment that molds public understanding and promotes normative cultural standards designed to benefit the status quo. A study by Bunnag and Chaemsaitong (2024) examines the COVID-19 news briefings, focusing on how government officials used multimodal communication to influence public perception and reshape the epidemic's narrative in a way that suited their political objectives as opposed to effectively resolving a serious public health issue. Furthermore, Mathayomchan, Taecharungroj, and Wattanacharoensil (2023) have examined how public sentiment and discourse on social media evolve over time, revealing the dynamic character of villainization.

Their examination of COVID-19-related tweets demonstrates the prevalence of negative emotions such as fear and fury in the conversation, which had a significant impact on public opinion and intensified negative feelings against specific groups. This contrast highlights the significance of monitoring social media in order to comprehensively comprehend and efficiently handle public attitudes amid emergencies impacting national security and public well-being.

The implication for future research is that the knowledge acquired from these investigations has substantial ramifications for future crisis communication. Enhanced insight into the construction of villains in media narratives can assist policymakers and communicators in formulating response strategies to combat stigmatization and the spread of misinformation. By advocating for inclusive and compassionate communication, it is possible to reduce the negative connotations and their effects on marginalized communities. Furthermore, the results of the research suggest the crucial necessity for a more subtle and sophisticated strategy for regulating the relationship between media discourse and governmental responses to major crises. It is vital to prioritize honest and equitable reporting during public health emergencies to prevent the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes and societal divisions. This awareness is especially crucial in an increasingly globalized society in which acute crises like pandemics and long-term issues like climate change and rising geopolitical tensions have profound consequences across various nations.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the ever-shifting blame on different portrayed villains can be interpreted as a key indicator that the villainization process of the COVID-19 subjects exists. It exists, moreover, in some cases with low or zero actual medical risks. The process of designating villainous characters, as can be seen from the table, did not arise from the single actions of these groups of people. They become the subjects of villainization because their identities have already been perceived negatively: the “Chinese” virus carried ethnopolitical undertones; *Pee Noi* involved issues of border politics and immigration; the Lumpini cluster with its military association; escapees of airport passengers whose foreign origins were considered high-risk and “tainted” with COVID-19 compared to the “clean” Thai residents whose livelihood was yet to be disturbed by COVID-19; curfew breakers with their association to ‘morally-questionable’ nightlife activities; and the Pantry Raiders with their uncharacteristically selfish behavior instead of a modest, grateful attitude of people committed to reciprocal communal support.

The analysis shows that the villainization process of the first-wave COVID-19 crisis in Thailand in the news headlines is clear. In each case, the role of a hero and a villain is set, mostly a few “anomalies” against the majority of citizens. Although the result is to be expected (as can be seen in the retrospective position from the present to the past) the analysis reveals a gap in which knowledge about COVID-19 subjects is not predominant in the realm of public health. The information concerning how to treat the COVID-19 virus and its subjects has not extended to emotions or morality: how should people perceive or feel towards the infected; if there are “good” vs. “bad” infected people; or even whether one should feel “guilty” upon discovering his or her COVID-19 positive result? The news headlines, in a way, fill this knowledge gap with instant access to moral or emotional stances toward factual events. The unconscious bias embedded in COVID-19-related news has been studied and proposed before in Batova’s article, “Picturing’ Xenophobia: Visual Framing of Masks During COVID-19 and Its Implications for Advocacy in Technical Communication” (2021). In addition, this research is an expansion of knowledge about text implications concerning COVID-19 and could help advance the academic disciplines of literature, discourse, and media communication theory.

The research scope could be narrower, with fewer cases, to provide an in-depth analysis of these texts. Nevertheless, these cases offer a foundational framework from which to begin and highlight trends which well warrant closer examination. In addition, the recommendation for further research would be to explore new disciplining practices that incorporate an awareness of the process and practice of villainization. Furthermore, the data itself could determine the outcome of the research, considering that the material used in the research focused entirely on the first wave of the pandemic. It would therefore be insightful to see the changes in people’s perceptions towards the COVID-19 subjects after the second, the third, and future crises of this nature.

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