

Crisis as a Trigger for the Reproduction of Otherness: The Never-ending Discrimination Against Myanmar Workers in Thai Society

Nuntiya Dounghummes^a, Jiraporn Saeheng^a

and Narongdej Phanthaphoommee^{a*}

^a*Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University,
Bangkok, Thailand*

^{*}*Corresponding Author. Email: narongdej.pha@mahidol.edu*

Received: February 5, 2023

Revised: June 12, 2023

Accepted: August 17, 2023

Abstract

This paper examines the othering discourse regarding Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand during the recent severe coronavirus outbreak around the workers' communities. Adopting an othering online discourse (OOD) framework, the study analyzes the comments made by Thai netizens in the posts of the three most popular Facebook news pages. It argues that there remains in Thai society an undercurrent of discriminatory attitudes and even hostility toward migrant workers among certain host-country population groups and that these attitudes can resurface at any time if a migrant-related crisis is presented as imminent. The findings show different usages of othering discourse: the slanderous remarks expressed in the comment threads are demonstrated as the reinforcement of social stigma, victim playing, and even eliminating the undesired through overt malice. They also reveal the frequent use of name-calling, vulgarities, and consensus-building among Thai netizens, which potentially perpetuate self-perceptions of superiority and mistreatment of migrants. Such usages indicate that Thai netizens who comment on these news posts harbor ideas of stigmatization, stereotyping, and alienation against migrants, which are likely to contribute significantly to their continual exclusion from Thai society. The social implication of this study is that misleading media coverage can trigger online reactions such as vile comments about migrants, thereby lowering their likelihood of being positively welcomed into host communities.

Keywords: othering discourse, stigmatization, stereotyping, vulnerabilities, social inclusion, migrant workers

Introduction

Discrimination against migrant workers in Thailand appears to have decreased over the last decade, owing to more lenient Thai government laws, work permits, and bilateral agreements with neighboring countries whose migrant workers enter Thailand. In addition, many published studies on migrant workers indicate that their willingness to perform 3-D jobs (dirty, difficult, and dangerous) is crucial for Thai economic growth (Photikanit et al., 2017; Sakulsri et al., 2020; Jampaklay et al., 2022). All of these factors seem to help reduce open and direct discriminatory acts toward vulnerable migrant workers, thus creating the illusion that migrant workers are welcomed and accepted in Thai society. However, at the end of 2020, when the COVID-19 outbreak occurred in Samut Sakhon, the province with the highest population of Myanmar workers in Thailand (Bureau of Registration Administration, 2021), it once again brought out the suppressed negative attitudes and reactions against this group of workers. This means that discrimination against Myanmar migrants has never really ceased, but has become an undercurrent awaiting the opportunity to resurface and strengthen. Despite the state's attempts to maintain a balanced stance on migrants' contributions to the country in their media discourse (e.g., Royal Thai Government, 2022), the recent crisis seems to have given rise to this form of othering.

It should not be a surprise, however, considering the past portrayal of these migrants in Thailand's media coverage, which asserted that Myanmar migrants were a threat to the country's national security (Grundy-Warr and Wong, 2002; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2004). Accounts of violent fighting, insurrection, and narcotics at the Myanmar border tended to be overstated, with the implication that most Myanmar migrants were criminals and threats to the public. Migrants were also stereotyped as a drain on the healthcare system and a potential source of diseases, regardless of their contribution to economic growth (see also Sunpuwan and Niyomsilp, 2012; Techawongstien and Phanthaphoommee, 2022). Such negative images have been imprinted

on many Thais' minds, leading to the labelling of the migrants as a danger to the lives and security of Thai society (Tunon and Baruah, 2012).

Examining the case of the COVID-19 outbreak in Samut Sakhon can provide a magnifying glass to the reproduction of otherness against Myanmar migrants. It has illuminated critical questions about the "real" perception of these migrant workers in Thai society. It seems that unless disasters are seen as a direct threat to the safety of the Thai majority, initiatives to reduce the risk for the disadvantaged few are likely to be ignored (Pross, 2021). Many traditional Thai media had covered the news of the coronavirus at migrant workers' epicenter for several weeks, which resulted in audiences receiving an excessive amount of negative information about the workers. Various online news outlets (e.g., *Thairath*, *Khaosod*, and *Sanook*) also reported on the severity of the situation through their Facebook fan pages, which allowed readers to respond, comment, and share their ideas in the comment section of the posts. As the news circulated, there was an increase in online hate speech targeting Myanmar migrant workers (Thepgumpanat et al., 2020). Countless comments on these news items showed blatant prejudice and confirmed many Thais' views of migrant labor as the *other*.

We, therefore, examine how Thai netizens encouraged and fostered one another's discourse when commenting on news posts about migrant workers in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic on Facebook, one of Thailand's most popular social networking sites (Statista, 2022). In particular, we seek possible answers to how the othering discourse pertaining to migrant workers is reproduced through the interaction among the discourse producer, migrant workers as the target, the potential motivation, and the virtual venue that facilitates the othering process. This study is conducted in response to a call for researchers to highlight vulnerable, marginalized people and demonstrate awareness of migrants' precarious position within their host countries' linguistic, cultural, and political contexts (e.g., Phillips, 2016; Montero-Sieburth, 2020). It also expands our understanding of discourse analysis and intercultural communication, particularly in relation to transborder policies.

Migrants and Media Coverage

Research from around the world often presents a bleak picture of the complicated social and economic paths of migrants laboring in low-wage industries (e.g., Sharma et al., 2021; Fargues et al., 2019). This type of representation, also observed in media coverage, can be understood in relation to such issues as migrant-initiated violence (Kaur et al., 2016), migrants' illegality (Blinder and Allen, 2016), or humanitarian crises (Colombo, 2018). A number of studies have looked at the political landscape and major news organizations to uncover the way in which the media covers the story of migration, which has produced a more critical (mis)understanding with an emphasis on migrants as either victims or threats (Triandafyllidou, 2016). The representation is thus crucial for defining the shared cultural-historical and political characteristics of the *other* (Andrijasevic and Mai, 2016).

The media coverage of migration can be unidirectional across the country; i.e., official state policies may influence the language use or visuals in public media to evoke specific imagery of migrants. Media outlets in various countries can foreground or conceal the unique experiences of migrants, for they arguably monopolize the reporting of migration (Šarić and Felberg, 2019). The media's portrayal of migrants as problematic frequently reinforces preconceived stereotypes about their inability to integrate into the host community (Phillips, 2016). This form of media-selective presentation may promote the stigmatization of migrants and prevent them from fully participating in the host society, thereby reflecting and reinforcing pre-existing unequal power systems (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017; Taylor, 2021). The frequent use of specific migration-related themes in the same language patterns across all media can suggest that these patterns are recognized as the organic explanation for the issue of migrants themselves (El Refaie, 2001).

Headlines and the body text of news stories sometimes can be misleading. Compared to other types of media, online news outlets are more prone to disseminating false information. However, readers tend to quickly evaluate its credibility by looking only at the headlines or

other visual elements. This is mainly because people's ability to comprehend information is limited by how the news is presented, leading them to form an uninformed opinion (Ecker et al., 2014). Through online comments, cyber-bystanders might be juxtaposed with those portrayed in the news as observers, defenders, or even reinforcers (Wachs, 2014). Negative portrayals of others by netizens are likely to incite bias and stigmatization (Domalewska, 2016). In Thailand, negative attitudes towards migrants revealed in previous studies have continued to be reinforced (e.g., Oh and Van der Stouwe, 2008; Allen et al., 2018), in both mainstream and social media. Focusing on the case of COVID-19 thus provides a magnifying glass to see the hidden nature of the othering process precipitated among the Thai public.

Othering Discourse

Van Dijk (2004) maintains that there are two types of discourse concerning the process of othering. The first one occurs among members of the dominant group and takes the form of negative characterization of the *outgroup*, frequently contrasted with a positive self-presentation. The second is manifested through indirect insults directed at subordinate outgroups by members of the dominant group. Differences in religion, ethnicity, class, or sexual orientation all contribute to a sense of otherness. Those who are *othered* may experience marginalization, stigmatization, and social inequality, leading to a strong formation of *us* versus *them* (e.g., Nartey and Lardegaard, 2021; Suppatkul, 2020) or a construct of *their* lives against *our* good ones (Yavaprabhas, 2022).

In terms of migrants, social constructs of the *other* can develop recognition that fortifies class structures and increases the social separation between migrants and host members (Fang et al., 2015). Discourses that use othering and dehumanizing language can also damage between-group relationships by reinforcing boundaries between *ingroup* and *outgroup* (Rochira et al. 2020). Martikainen and Sakki (2021) opine that numerous rhetorical strategies, including dividing, victimizing, denouncing, and recontextualizing the *other*,

can be employed to dehumanize the target group, especially marginalized groups like migrant laborers. The results of othering discourse directed at migrant workers may lead to many forms of discrimination. They can allow for stigmatization or the devaluation of migrant workers' characteristics against the host country's larger framework of conceptual and socioeconomic security (e.g. Simons et al., 2018; Schuster and Majidi, 2015). Othering discourse can maintain stereotypes or the cultural generalization of observed distinctions among migrants—the essentialist view centered on what “*the others*” do and how to treat them (e.g. Hung and Min, 2021; Reyes, 2009). The binary of *us* and *them* in the discourse can signify a swift change in societal moods and a process of alienation, thereby showing the failure to engage in and preferentially apply certain assertions with interest-driven methods of rejecting or downplaying the complexity of minority groups (Scholten, 2020; Grabowska, 2023).

Discourse operations in popular media, as Ladegaard (2017) asserts, should thus be investigated to understand the emergence of this type of social exclusion. Considering our case, the media's discourse (headlines, news posts, and opinions) can be crafted to attract the attention of readers. This strategy may promote negativity towards people portrayed in the post, affecting several groups, some of whom may be mistakenly attributed to *others* (Nartey and Lardegaard, 2021: 196). We use these concepts as a point of departure to investigate the othering discourse (re)produced by Thai netizens on Facebook as members of the host country (*us*) in opposition to migrant laborers (*them*). To examine how certain people are portrayed as *others* on social networking sites, we applied Vaahensalo's (2021) concept of “othering online discourse” (OOD). OOD is a complex social, intersectional, and discursive practice that frequently exploits the open characteristics of online forums to promote a sense of community-based rejection and societal stereotyping, relying on the anonymous nature of the digital platform to promote discriminatory, negative attitudes within given virtual groups. This is accomplished by persuading like-minded people to exclude the *other*, while fostering group relationships based on the

use of specific othering patterns (*disruptive, constructive, excluding, confronting*) and orientations (*external, internal, outward, inward*). In her analysis, Vahensaalo adopts critical discourse analysis (CDA), which is a text-analytical approach to investigating underlying interconnections of discrimination or domination as they form in language (Wodak, 1995: 204). CDA research frequently reveals how social power, injustice, control, and oppression are performed, maintained, or challenged through verbal and written language in a socio-political environment (Van Dijk, 2001). According to Vahensaalo (2021: 232), “critical discourse analysis is a tool for addressing the often-subtle nature of OOD [...] Because of the indirect and potentially subtle nature of othering discourse, a discourse analytical perspective helps to contextualize online interactions.” This study uses the OOD as a broad analytical framework, rather than strictly following their detailed categorization of othering discourse patterns. This allows the inclusion of additional emerging categories of the othering usage from the case in question.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach in conjunction with discourse analysis to interpret data gathered from Facebook fan pages of Thai news outlets that featured information on migrant workers and the spread of COVID-19. The data was obtained from December 1, 2020 to April 1, 2021 (the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand).

It applied the othering online discourse (OOD) framework to the analysis of the collected Thai netizens' comments on online news posts and headlines. We chose a representative sample of news based on the reinforcement of othering discourse on migrant workers. These samples were taken from Thailand's three most popular fan pages: (1) *Khaosod*, (2) *Thairath*, and (3) *Sanook* (Statista, 2021). A preliminary survey using the Thai keywords, “migrant workers,” “Burma,” “Myanmar,” and “COVID-19,” on the Facebook fan page of all three

news agencies resulted in a total of 137 news stories and 88,373 comments on posted news related to migrant workers and the coronavirus outbreak, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 Number of news items and comments related to migrant workers and COVID-19

News outlet	Number of news items	Number of comments
<i>Khaosod</i>	64	49,208
<i>Thairath</i>	46	35,866
<i>Sanook</i>	27	3,299
Total	137	88,373

We then determined the sample size of the netizens' comments using Yamane's (1970) formula ($n = 88,373/1 + 88,373(0.05)^2$). This resulted in a sample size of 398 units of comments, yet we collected additional units from each fan page and rounded up the number of units to 450 (150 units each) so as to ensure data saturation and adequacy for analysis. All units were selected following these criteria: (1) They were from the top ten most-commented news items of each fan page, and (2) the first 15 comments in those ten news items under Facebook's category of "most relevant" were collected.

The data was then coded, based primarily on the emerging characteristics of othering discourse. A qualitative description was used to analyze and interpret the coded data. The three authors were assigned different roles: the first two authors coded the data separately before the third author triangulated the coded data and analysis so as to elicit only similar results. Each author, again, took turns reviewing the results of coding and analysis until there was no room for disagreement.

Names and profiles of Facebook accounts were kept confidential to carefully protect the identities of the account owners. Note that the authors translated the examples in the following section to present the findings; they may not all be grammatically correct, but they reflect the actual language choices of netizens.

Results

The news posts with headlines driving the othering process against migrant workers tend to be full of negativity-induced language. In discussing or arguing about identity and humanity, the news outlets under scrutiny employ typical name-calling to refer to migrant workers as *raeng-gnan tang-dao* (literally, 'alien workers') or simply *tang-dao* ('aliens') on the headlines of 69 news pieces (50.36 percent of the total). The term *tang-dao*, which carries a depreciative view, has become synonymous with migrant laborers, building on existing forms of ethnic discrimination against *them*. In most instances, news outlets employed the terms *phawa* ('shocked'), *pha-gna* ('startled'), *hung* ('concerned'), or *klua* ('afraid') to suggest uneasiness towards what they referred to as "migrant-infested" situations. Trusted sources of statistics were also used in the news to enhance the agencies' credibility. For example, the Suan Dusit Poll, one of the most influential polling agencies in Thailand, was cited to establish the consensus view on the migrant issue and to reaffirm that the news outlet is not the only one covering this matter.

The negative language used in the headlines of the newspapers under investigation to a considerable degree portrayed Myanmar workers in three ways: (1) migrant workers threatening state security; (2) as a representation such that readers developed prejudices against workers from other ethnic backgrounds; and (3) as posing a public health threat, such as carrying an unfamiliar disease into Thailand (cf. Ativanitchayawong, 2020). This pattern of headlines has inevitably set an agenda (McCombs, 2014); the news influences the public's opinion of migrant workers and encourages like-minded netizens to comment negatively on the story. Clearly, our findings support the idea of the media's role as agenda-setters in the discrimination against migrants with the use of abusive language to provoke negative responses about *others* from online social media users. Nevertheless, what is intriguing about the immediate effect of agenda-setting is how the othering process manifests at the comment level.

After analyzing the Thai netizens' comments, we found some notable OOD usages that contribute to various forms of discrimination in 54 (12 percent) out of 450 comments, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Usages of othering online discourse and examples

Usages	Percentage	Examples
Expressing aggression	6.23	'shoot them right there,' 'sneak shoot them all,' 'better grab the neck and strike with the right knee,' 'agree ... just shoot them'
Consensus-building	3.11	'+100,000,' 'Love this comment best,' 'yes, very selfish bastards'
Blaming	1.33	'these people brought the disease,' 'The workers transmitted the disease by leaving stealthily'
Victim playing	0.89	'now causing trouble in Thailand ... traitors,' 'it's rare that they don't betray us ...'
Excluding	0.44	'yes, incarcerate them together,' 'the right solution is to strictly prohibit employing foreign workers'
Total	12.00	(54 out of 450 comments)

Notably, we uncovered additional discriminatory implications for the Thai netizens' comments in the OOD usages. All of which are replete with negative language and thereby reinforce negative portrayals of migrant workers in various ways, as demonstrated in the next sections.

"Get Rid of Them – They Made Us Suffer"

Already-negative presentations of migrant workers in the headlines tend to be responded to by aggressive comments to the news posts with opinions that are harsh, confrontational, and sometimes encouraging violence, such as calling for the murder or elimination of migrant workers. The majority of online commenters explicitly agree with such a hostile attitude of elimination or killing the *other* due to the perception that these employees will spread disease and cause further hardship among Thai citizens. As seen in Example 1, there are terms or phrases with remarkably negative meanings related to shootings, such as *ying-thing* ('shoot off') and *aep-ying* ('sneak shoot').

- (1) When Thailand had the first outbreak, they fled back as if Thai people were chasing and killing them. Now *they are making Thai people suffer* because of their lack of common sense. If I were the commander of the army, I would order the soldiers to freeze the border and *shoot 'em all, those aliens*.
(Khaosod, 21 December 2020)

The above statement demonstrates obvious contempt for the fact that Myanmar workers were clamoring to return to work in Thai territory, with over sixty thousand people lining the borders at that time. The commenter compares himself to military leaders and convinces the reader that Myanmar workers should be exterminated. This view definitely discourages foreign laborers from integrating into Thai society and devalues them with the excuse of Thailand's socioeconomic instability. Worse still, the vast majority of netizens responded to this comment with more than a thousand "likes" in support of the expulsion or even execution of migrant workers.

There are additional views that contribute to migrants being seen as the *other* by focusing on the adversarial devaluation; for example, 'migrant workers are carriers of disease,' 'migrant workers are the ones who tend to steal Thai jobs,' and 'in the end, the contagious person is the alien.' All of these comments demonstrate that these individuals stigmatize migrant workers as contagious, virulent sub-humans who constitute a threat to Thai society, as in Example 2.

- (2) Should it be like this? The Thai people are patient and will fight until there is no more COVID-19. [...] But in the end, the people who spread the infection are those aliens. When it's like this, the more I think about it, the more I spit up blood. My breath will explode. I'm so angry!
(Sanook, 23 December 2020)

This comment is in response to the news that Thai law enforcers intercepted Myanmar workers whose employers helped them flee the

detention centre in Samut Sakhon. Netizens like those in Example 2 chose to follow the news lead and further stigmatize the migrant workers by slandering them and expressing their fury through the text so that a number of commenters expressed agreement, as seen by the significant number of likes on the comment post when the news focused on the misconduct of Myanmar workers.

“They Are Such an Irresponsible Race”

Online commenters tend to collocate the term *raeng-gnan* (‘workers’) with words such as *suan-mark* (‘mainly’), *phama yoe-mak* (‘too many Myanmar’), or even *ai-phuak* ([derogatory] ‘them’), to describe Myanmar people as a band of dangerous criminals or a racial group that requires close surveillance. As demonstrated in Example 3, the use of these words has a negative connotation, as the term *ai* is a contemptuous way of referring to others.

- (3) [pejorative-*ai*] those neighbors’ employees are contagious. They sneak in and out. They went home and came in to infect the owner of the shrimp raft. Let’s add a heavy penalty.
(Thairath, 19 December 2020)

In addition, Myanmar workers are also labelled as people who live disorderly lives. Statements such as ‘migrants are unruly’ suggest that migrant workers are troublesome.

- (4) Knowing that those aliens are disorderly, [the authorities] instead of being strict from the start, just let them be until it became a problem that could not be stopped and it troubled people in the country.
(Thairath, 19 December 2020)

Comments like Example 4, however, perpetuate the perception that all migrants, including those who enter legitimately, are indeed an irresponsible race that will eventually cause disturbance and difficulties

for the Thai people. Such a stereotypical comment strongly emphasizes the inherent differences of the *other* from well-behaving Thais and their incompatibility with Thai society as a whole, hence increasing the humanitarian burden on Thais.

“History Just Repeats Itself”

Commenters frequently made historical allusions by connecting the perceived damage that migrant workers did during the COVID-19 crisis with the Burmese invasion of Thailand more than two centuries ago. Examples are ‘Myanmar invades Thailand in order to reclaim it’ and ‘in the past they burned Thailand to the ground.’ This could justifiably explain the perception that, although migrant workers from Myanmar are a cheap source of labor, they were the arch-enemy of *our* nation in the past.

- (5) I’ve heard that the Burmese attacked Krungsri in the past. Now Burma will invade Bangkok and its vicinity again. Will the whole nation fall again? They have no gratitude. [angry emoticon]
- Reply 1 Krungsri fell because some Thais were spies. This time round, as well, those Thai middlemen, those evil [pejorative]
- Reply 2 Burma would not give up harassing Thailand since ancient times.
(Thairath, 22 December 2020)

The lines, ‘Burma attacked Krungsri [the older capital]’ or ‘Burma continued to harass Thailand,’ are prevalent in the texts under scrutiny. These word clusters are all historical references, intended to demonstrate that the Myanmar people have been Thailand’s adversaries throughout history. Such a conception can be seen in the discourse contained in novels, films, or historical textbooks, which have colored many Thais’ views of Myanmar as the enemy (see Chutintaranond, 1992).

Moreover, as the recipients of the misconduct of these wayward *others*, stereotypical processes are also employed in *our* favor (or stereotyping of *us*). It is possible to locate comment threads on news stories that reinforce the othering of migrant workers through offensive remarks, such as ‘now causing trouble in Thailand ... traitor,’ or that ‘it’s rare that they don’t betray us ... there are many decent, diligent people, but the ones we meet are just interested in taking advantage of us.’ These statements all contain direct allegations against migrant workers as troublemakers. The usage of the words ‘traitor’ and ‘betray’ in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic carries a strong negative connotation that comes with the commenters’ unjustified accusations. This strategy is a victim card with exaggerated hardship to justify inhumane treatment, persuade readers, and deflect blame to *others*, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of complaints against migration policy as a whole. Even worse is the fact that most replies were in support of these comments as a means of building consensus, as suggested by the use of the terms: *chai leoi* (‘agree’), *thuk-tong* (‘yes’), or *rak commen-ni thi-sut* (‘I love this comment the most’). These terms reveal underlying perceptions that unavoidably contribute to the marginalization of migrant workers.

“Detain These Aliens in One Place”

The term *tang-dao* (‘alien’) is frequently used in online discussions about migrant labour, echoing language used in news reports and headlines. Nonetheless, a multitude of remarks employing vulgar terms to refer to migrant workers, such as *phuak hea ni* (‘these f*cking bastards’) or *phuak man* (‘they/it [pejorative]’) reveal the extremely negative opinions of individuals about outgroup migrants. Offensive words and phrases were commonly used by netizens as pronouns for migrant workers, highlighting disdain and the view that these people were beneath them socially. The process of alienation through negative pronoun use unquestionably widens the gap between ingroup and outgroup, thereby diminishing the status of migrant workers and their assimilability to the host society.

Furthermore, some commenters recommended confining migrant workers communally in a certain quarantined venue. The term ‘detain,’ with a connotation of human deprivation, was used frequently and specifically in reference to infectious migrant workers, suggesting that they do not deserve to dwell alongside Thais or other members of Thai society, as in Example 6.

- (6) a Would it be good to *detain* some Burmese in one place? Otherwise, they’d still be roaming around. They won’t listen to you. Sigh...
- b Yes, *incarcerate* them all.

(Thairath, 22 December 2020)

One commenter sees layoffs of migrant workers as a means to curb the spread of the viral infection: ‘Despite our efforts to close the border, they were able to escape. The right solution is to strictly prohibit employing foreign workers. Return them all to their own countries of origin.’ This statement expresses blatant prejudice towards migrant workers without considering the fact that migrant labor is still in great demand by many Thai industries because foreign laborers are more willing to do difficult, dangerous, and dirty manual jobs than are most Thai people.

Concluding Discussion

The primary motivation behind this paper is the urge to understand how online othering against Myanmar migrants remains an undercurrent in today’s social media-mediated discourse. Samut Sakhon’s COVID-19 outbreak provides a glimpse into the broader process of othering against migrant workers in Thailand. We have shown that many Thai netizens react to the Facebook news posts about this vulnerable migrant group during the pandemic in the comment section by *blatantly expressing aggression, building consensus among like-minded individuals, unjustly blaming, victim playing, and excluding the undesired through overt*

malice. This suggests that biased media coverage instigates hateful opinions about migrants and thus reduces their likelihood of integrating into the host communities (cf. Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017).

Many comments and replies by netizens indicate a high level of aggression that eventually triggers the reinforcement of the social stigma of the “alien” among Myanmar migrants. Such active stigmatization is replete with negative terms, some even malicious and threatening to the targeted group, sometimes dehumanizing them by equating them with livestock (cf. Taylor, 2021; Berman, 2016) or debasing them by proposing incarceration due to their different identities and the infectiousness of their health conditions. Their living and working conditions are used not only to strengthen stigmatization with negative words, but also to build a stereotypical image of them as “disorderly” or “undisciplined,” unlike we-Thais who are more compliant with the government’s precautionary measures during the pandemic. The findings of this study concur with El Refaie’s (2001) contention that when certain discourses become naturalized, they can reinforce the ways in which people talk and translate this reinforcement into actual practices by blurring the lines between the literal and the non-literal.

In reference to migrant workers, online commenters frequently employ the name-calling tactic. Commonly, the term *tang-dao* (‘alien’) is used to denote hostile perceptions of foreign labor, such as the possibility that they are dangerous criminals or disease carriers. However, as the term is included in official Thai documents issued by the state to refer only to a non-Thai national, it may be difficult to confirm that this name-calling reflects the true negative opinion of media sources. It is likely due to their attempt to adopt the term following the writing convention imposed by the Thai state, which nonetheless results in a negative portrayal of migrants and inadvertently frames the netizens’ discussion of the marginalized. Also widespread is the use of vulgar language to dehumanize vulnerable migrants, thereby making them lower in social status, alienating them from the ingroup Thai, and excluding them from enjoying basic human rights such as the right to

travel and have a decent job. This shows that rhetorical devices can be used to degrade the target group (Martikainen and Sakki, 2021) and the way they should be treated (Hung and Min, 2021). These online verbal attacks, directed primarily at this disadvantaged outgroup, further normalize the host citizens’ superior attitudes and treatment of the “alien.”

Moreover, the non-monologue and consensus-building nature of the othering online discourse (Vaahensalo, 2021) parallel the concept of collectivism. This study reveals that many replies with ‘yes’ or ‘right’ obviously sustain the othering discourse against migrants and underscore the collective mindset triggered by agreement-induced rhetoric in comments. This demonstrates how deeply ingrained negative *stereotypes* of migrants are in the minds of many Thai netizens, to the point where they adopt such a biased belief in unison that labels the *other* as a threat to Thais’ well-being and the security of Thai society (see Tunon and Baruah, 2012).

Many of the comments analyzed reflect an array of initial prejudice and profoundly misguided attitudes towards migrant labor, as evidenced by their almost continual use of confronting and excluding forms of language. These views can be traced to two assumptions: (1) historical bias (i.e., the Burmese are viewed as an *enemy* in Thai nationalist historiography) and (2) occupational bias (i.e., the majority of migrant workers are employed in the manual labor sector). Migrant workers are stereotypically regarded as having a lower status than local labor, with the common perception that they are unskilled laborers and part of the working class. These assumptions, according to Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2004), recall the earlier paradoxical representation of migrant workers in Thai media, which suggested that Myanmar migrants, on the one hand, pose a socio-political threat to the country, while on the other, are essential to economic insecurity because country’s businesses would not survive without them. Several underprivileged communities may be seriously impacted by this form of media agenda setting, in which the problems of certain groups may be incorrectly but *alienatingly* passed off as those of *others* (see also Sunpuwan and Niyomsilp, 2012; Nartey and Lardegaard, 2021).

Regarding social implications, we argue that Thai netizens are accustomed to and continue to harbor ideas of *stigmatization*, *stereotyping*, and *alienation* against migrant workers, as inferred from the aforementioned processes of othering in the discourses under study. These processes lead to the persistent exclusion from Thai society of stigmatized and negatively stereotyped migrants who have different linguistic and ethnic identities and ways of life. Our case lends credence to Arcimaviciene and Baglama's (2018) argument that the media's narratives can demean the migrant's social positionality by reinforcing the "alien" stereotype, thus fostering a broad sense of suspicion and prejudice in the host society. The pandemic demonstrates beyond doubt that prejudice towards migrant labor still exists and can resurface at any time if harm to the citizens of the host nation is believed to be imminent and linked to this "alien" presence.

In conclusion, we can see that the status quo seems to suggest a shift towards a more intercultural worldview in Thai society at large and, among many Myanmar workers, their tenacity in demonstrating their helpfulness, trustworthiness, and diligence for the host country, such as in the case of a worker posting a video clip with her call for understanding and the end of migrant stereotyping (Matichon, 2020). Nevertheless, the Myanmar workers targeted for blaming in our case continued to be deprived of human qualities, and their social position was still downplayed in the comments of the news posts.

One limitation of this research is that we cannot generalize the tendency of online othering by netizens against all migrants. If a larger dataset is compiled, it may be possible to observe the same online othering process as witnessed in the current ones. Future studies could employ multimodal analysis to determine the link between the texts and images or even the graphic presentation in the news postings or the comments themselves, such as emoticons or cartoon stickers. Another interesting topic would be the reactions of Myanmar workers themselves, which could be examined as an extension of the current study's scope in order to gain a better understanding of whether Thai society is truly shifting towards an intercultural mindset or whether it remains mired in the black hole of nationalist ignorance.

References

- Allen, W., Blinder, S., and McNeil, R. (2018). Media reporting of migrants and migration. **World Migration Report**. Geneva: International Organization for Migration. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wom3.8>
- Andrijasevic, R. and Mai, N. (2016). Editorial: Trafficking (in) representations: Understanding the recurring appeal of victimhood and slavery in neoliberal times. **Anti-Trafficking Review**, 7, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121771>
- Arcimaviciene, L. and Baglama, S. H. (2018). Migration, metaphor and myth in media representations: The ideological dichotomy of "them" and "us." **Sage Open**, 8(2), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244018768657>
- Blinder, S. and Allen, W. L. (2016). Constructing immigrants: Portrayals of migrant groups in British national newspapers, 2010-2012. **International Migration Review**, 50(1), 3-40.
- Chouliaraki, L. and Zaborowski, R. (2017). Voice and community in the 2015 refugee crisis: A content analysis of news coverage in eight European countries. **International Communication Gazette**, 79(6-7), 613-635.
- Chutintaranond, S. (1992). The image of the Burmese enemy in Thai perceptions and historical writings. **Journal of the Siam Society**, 80(1), 89-98.
- Colombo, M. (2018). The representation of the "European refugee crisis" in Italy: Domopolitics, securitization, and humanitarian communication in political and media discourses. **Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies**, 16(1-2), 161-178.
- Domalewska, D. (2016). Immigration, stereotypes, and social security: The portrayal of migrant groups in public discourse. **Security and Defence Quarterly**, 13(4), 15-31.
- Ecker, U. K. H., Lewandowsky, S., Chang, E. P., and Pillai, R. (2014). The effects of subtle misinformation in news headlines. **Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied**, 20(4), 323-335.
- El Refaie, E. (2001). Metaphors we discriminate by Naturalized themes in Austrian newspaper articles about asylum seekers. **Journal of Sociolinguistics**, 5(3), 352-371.
- Fang, M. L., Sixsmith, J., Lawthom, R., Mountian, I., and Shahrin, A. (2015). Experiencing 'pathologized presence and normalized absence': Understanding health related experiences and access to health care among Iraqi and Somali asylum seekers, refugees and persons without legal status. **BMC Public Health**, 15(1), 1-12.

- Fargues, P., Shah, N. M., and Brouwer, I. (2019). **Working and living conditions of low-income migrant workers in the hospitality and construction sectors in the United Arab Emirates: A survey among migrant workers through focus group discussions.** Gulf Labour Markets, Migration and Population Programme (GLMM).
- Grabowska, I. (2023). Societal dangers of migrant crisis narratives with a special focus on Belarussian and Ukrainian borders with Poland. **Frontiers in Sociology**, 7, 1084732. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2022.1084732>
- Grundy-Warr, C. and Wong, E. S. Y. (2002). Geographies of displacement: The Karenni and the Shan across the Myanmar-Thailand border. **Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography**, 23(1), 93-122. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9493.00120>
- Hung, A. H.C. and Min, A. M. (2021). "I'm afraid": The cultural challenges in conducting ethnographic fieldwork and interviews in Myanmar. **Qualitative Research Journal**, 21(2), 113-123. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-07-2020-0074>
- Jampaklay, A., Khamkhom, N., Korinek, K., Kittisuksathit, S., Ko Ko, M., Sok, S., and Prum, V. (2022). Gender and Remittances Across the Mekong Subregion. **Journal of Mekong Societies**, 18(2), 1-26.
- Kaur, S., Tan, N., and Dutta, M. J. (2016). Media, migration and politics: The coverage of the little India riot in The Straits Times in Singapore. **Journal of Creative Communications**, 11(1), 27-43.
- Ladegaard, H. J. (2017). **The discourse of powerlessness and repression: Life stories of domestic migrant workers in Hong Kong.** London: Routledge.
- McCombs, M. (2014). **Setting the agenda: Mass media and public opinion.** 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity.
- Martikainen, J. and Sakki, I. (2021). Visual (de)humanization: Construction of Otherness in newspaper photographs of the refugee crisis. **Ethnic and Racial Studies**, 44(16), 236-266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1965178>
- Montero-Sieburth, M. (2020). Ethical dilemmas and challenges in ethnographic migration research. **Qualitative Research Journal**, 20(3), 281-291. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-12-2019-0100>
- Nartey, M. and Ladegaard, H. J. (2021). Constructing undesirables: A critical discourse analysis of othering of Fulani nomads in the Ghanaian news media. **Discourse & Communication**, 15(2), 184-199.
- Oh, S. A. and Van der Stouwe, M. (2008). Education, diversity, and inclusion in Burmese refugee camps in Thailand. **Comparative Education Review**, 52(4), 589-617.

- Phillips, D. P. (2016). Interpreting and presenting marginalized voices through intersubjective accounts. **Qualitative Research Journal**, 16(1), 26-38. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-03-2015-0020>
- Photikanit, K., Sirasoonthorn, P., and Buddharaksa, W. (2017). *Raeng-gnan khamchat kap kanthamhaipen "sat-setthakit" phaitai phawakanthukkotthap: koranisuksa raeng-gnan khamchat nai prathet thai.* (In Thai) [Migrant workers and an economic animalization under subalternity: A case of migrant workers in Thailand]. **Journal of Social Science, Narasuan University**, 13(2), 99-119.
- Rajaram, P. K. and Grundy-Warr, C. (2004). The irregular migrant as *homo sacer*: Migration and detention in Australia, Malaysia, and Thailand. **International Migration**, 42(1), 33-64.
- Reyes, A. (2009). Asian American stereotypes as circulating resource. In A. Reyes and A. Lo (Eds.), **Beyond yellow English: Toward a linguistic anthropology of Asian Pacific America.** (pp. 43-62). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rochira, A., Avdi, E., Kadianaki, I., Pop, A., Redd, R. R., Sammut, G., and Suerdem, A. (2020). Immigration. In T. Mannarini, G. A. Veltri and S. Salvatore (Eds.), **Media and social representations of otherness: Psycho-social-cultural implications.** (pp. 39-59). New York: Springer.
- Sakulsri, T., Nurick, R., and Oeur, I. (2020). Exploring the experiences of Cambodian labor migrants: The journey to Thailand under the framework for bilateral agreements. **Journal of Mekong Societies**, 16(1), 1-25.
- Šarić, L. and Felberg, T. R. (2019). Representations of the 2015/2016 "migrant crisis" on the online portals of Croatian and Serbian public broadcasters. In L. Viola and A. Musolff (Eds.), **Migration and media: Discourses about identities in crisis.** (pp. 203-238). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Scholten, P. (2020). Mainstreaming versus alienation: Conceptualising the role of complexity in migration and diversity policymaking. **Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies**, 46(1), 108-126.
- Schuster, L. and Majidi, N. (2015). Deportation stigma and re-migration. **Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies**, 41(4), 635-652.
- Sharma, J. R., Sharma, A., and Kapilashrami, A. (2021). Covid-19 and the precarity of low-income migrant workers in Indian cities. **Society and Culture in South Asia**, 7(1), 48-62.
- Simons, A. M., Houkes, I., Koster, A., Groffen, D. A., and Bosma, H. (2018). The silent burden of stigmatisation: A qualitative study among Dutch people with a low socioeconomic position. **BMC Public Health**, 18(1), 1-13.

- Sunpuwan, M. and Niyomsilpa, S. (2012). Perception and misperception: Thai public opinions on refugees and migrants from Myanmar. **Journal of Population and Social Studies**, 21(1), 47-58.
- Suppatkul, P. (2020). Intraethnic Othering among Thai Wives of White American Men: An Intersectional Approach. **Journal of Mekong Societies**, 16(3), 24-43.
- Taylor, C. (2021). Metaphors of migration over time. **Discourse & Society**, 32(4), 463-481.
- Techawongstien, K. and Phanthaphoommee, N. (2022). Unintentional containment of the contaminated: The role of translation and interpreting during the COVID-19 crisis in Thailand. **Journal of Internationalization and Localization**, 9(2), 181-207. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jial.00026.tec>
- Triandafyllidou, A. (Ed.). (2016). **Irregular migrant domestic workers in Europe: Who cares?**. London: Routledge.
- Tunon, M. and Baruah, N. (2012). Public attitudes towards migrant workers in Asia. **Migration and Development**, 1(1), 149-162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21632324.2012.718524>
- Vaahensalo, E. (2021). Creating the other in online interaction: Othering online discourse theory. In J. Bailey, A. Flynn and N. Henry (Eds.) **The Emerald international handbook of technology-facilitated violence and abuse**. (pp. 227-246). Bingley: Emerald Publishing.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (2001). Multidisciplinary CDA: A plea for diversity. In R. Wodak and M. Meyer (Eds.) **Methods of critical discourse analysis**. (pp. 95-120). Sage.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (2004). Politics, ideology and discourse. In K. Brown (Ed.), **Encyclopedia of language and linguistics**, Vol. 9. (pp. 728-740). Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Wachs, S. (2014). Moral disengagement and emotional and social difficulties in bullying and cyberbullying: Differences by participant role. In P. Smith (Ed.), **Emotional and behavioural difficulties associated with bullying and cyberbullying**. (pp. 119-132). New York: Routledge.
- Wodak, R. (1995). Critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis. In J. Verschueren, J. O. Ostman, and J. Blommaert (Eds.), **Handbook of pragmatics**. (pp. 204-210). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Yamane, T. (1970). **Statistics: An introductory analysis**. New York: Harper & Row.
- Yavaprabhas, K. (2022). Creating “good” Thai citizens: Religions in Thai textbooks. **Journal of Mekong Societies**, 18(2), 105-124.

Websites

- Ativanitchayawong, N. (2020, May 8). *Sewana raeng-gnan khamchat khunkha thi thuk luem*. (In Thai) [Seminar on transborder migrant workers: Forgotten value in the COVID-19 battle field]. Retrieved January 15, 2023, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_gqRmwWCs
- Berman, N. (2016) Syria's displaced: A photo essay. **Dissent**. Retrieved February 5, 2023, from <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/syria-displaced-photo-essay-zaatari-refugee-camp>
- Bureau of Registration Administration. (2021). **Number of foreign workers of 3 nationalities (Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia) by province, divided by age range**. Retrieved December 24, 2022, from https://www.bora.dopa.go.th/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/MigrantWorker_AgeRange_Province_05082564.pdf
- Khaosod. (2020, December 21). *Kho khao thai 6 muen rai*. (In Thai) [60 thousand people ask permission to enter Thailand]. Retrieved November 22, 2023, from https://www.khaosod.co.th/covid-19/news_5574733
- Pross, C. (2021, December 14). Migrant workers in times of Covid-19: An empathetic disaster response for Myanmar workers in Thailand. **Stockholm Environment Institute**. Retrieved February 5, 2023, from <https://www.sei.org/perspectives/migrant-workers-covid-disaster-response>
- Matichon. (2020, December 24). *Sao phama at khip rabai kwamchai thang namta 'kho hai phi-phi yut da khonphama ko mai yak pen*. (In Thai) [Myanmar girl posting a clip pouring out her heart with tears: “Please stop blaming us; Myanmar people do not want to be infected either”]. Retrieved June 10, 2023, from <https://www.matichon.co.th/social/news2499131>
- Royal Thai Government. (2022). **Thailand becomes first nation to take part in WHO's “Joint Assessment Mission to Assess Health System Capacity and Essential Public Health Functions to Address the Health Needs of Refugees and Migrants.”** Retrieved February 5, 2023, from <https://www.thaigov.go.th/news/contents/details/61105>
- Sanook. (2020, December 23). *Duan! samutsakon tit kowid-19 ruam 548 rai*. (In Thai) [Urgent! Samut Sakon found 548 infected with COVID-19]. Retrieved November 22, 2023, from <https://www.facebook.com/SanookNews/photos/a.188607984518063/4320055878039899/>
- Statista. (2021). **Leading Facebook (FB) pages in Thailand in 2021, by number of likes**. Retrieved June 14, 2022, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1180414/thailand-leading-facebook-pages-by-number-of-likes/>
- Statista. (2022). **Penetration of leading social networks in Thailand as of February 2022**. Retrieved June 14, 2022, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/284483/thailand-social-network-penetration/>

- Thairath. (2020, December 19). **Lokdao samutsakhon**. (In Thai) [Samut Sakhon in lockdown]. Retrieved November 22, 2023, from <https://www.facebook.com/thairath/photos/a.10152097116437439/10160146162092439/>
- Thairath. (2020, December 22). **Tit chuea thalu phan**. (In Thai) [Infected over a thousand]. Retrieved November 22, 2023, from <https://www.facebook.com/thairath/photos/ด่วน-สมุทรสาครติดเชื้ออีก-242-ราย-รวมทะลุพัน-รอผลอีก-2348-ราย22-ธันวาคม-นายวีระศ/10160153570152439/>
- Thepgumpanat, P., Naing, S., and Tostevin, M. (2020, 24 December). Anti-Myanmar hate speech flares in Thailand over virus. **Reuters**. Retrieved October 18, 2022, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-thailand-myanmar-idUSKBN28Y0KS>