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FOCUS **THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, (IM)MOBILITIES, AND MIGRATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

ASEAS

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Advances in Southeast Asian Studies (formerly, Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies)

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FOCUS **THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, (IM)MOBILITIES, AND MIGRATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

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The present issue of ASEAS features a focus on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mobility and migration in and between Southeast Asian countries, assessing past, current, and future trends as well as its cultural, social, economic, ecological, and political implications. As many other regions in the world, Southeast Asian countries have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although most countries managed to cope relatively well with the first wave in 2020, subsequent waves saw rising death tolls and immense pressures on the region's health and welfare systems. At the same time, travel restrictions and local as well as national lockdowns affected migrant populations disproportionally as hundreds of thousands got stuck in either their countries of origin or destination countries with little or no alternative means of making a living. This special issue presents six empirically grounded case studies (four current research and two research workshop articles) that address the COVID-19-migration/mobility nexus in Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Australia. Articles outside this special issue focus address topics of hazard related vulnerability and coping strategies in the Philippines as well as the media consumption/travel motivation nexus in the Philippines regarding Thailand.

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Claudia Dolezal, 2023 (Thailand, Bankgkok, Suvarnabhumi Airport)

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The COVID-19 Pandemic, (Im)Mobilities, and Migration in Southeast Asia

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Rarely has a single subject seen such extensive participation in debate across numerous disciplines within international academic publishing as the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering its enduring nature and global impact, COVID-19 has transcended its initial health crisis and evolved into a multi-faceted crisis. According to Ali (2021), COVID-19 manifested as an economic, social, emotional/psychological, and political pandemic. Since its first detection in late 2019, COVID-19 profoundly affected the world's political, legal, social, economic, moral, and cultural systems, necessitating responses on multiple scales. This multiple crisis has demanded scientific explanations and technocratic solutions, while also prompting philosophical sense-making and even speculation about what lies ahead.

Due to the frequent use of metaphors likening the COVID-19 pandemic to warfare or invasion (Avalos & Moussawi, 2023), it is hardly surprising that defensive introspection and inward-looking perspectives were propelled by the pandemic. The swift and extensive arrival of the pandemic, along with its vast scope, immediately redirected attention to local living environments. Consequently, analyses focused on cities, provinces, and nation-states became readily available and were highly sought after, surpassing interest in developments elsewhere.

Developments outside of immediate contexts were further complicated by the virus's diverse dynamics and its rapid mutations, resulting in constantly evolving landscapes of contagion. The scope of the pandemic was simply overpowering and (academic) capacities were overwhelmed (early exemptions include Muhammad & Zanker, 2021). Throughout the pandemic, the prevailing tendency was towards inward-looking approaches, as vaccine nationalism took precedence over universal distribution schemes. International solidarity and transnational cooperation took a back seat, giving rise to a resurgence of nationalism. According to Christoph Horn (2020), the initial national responses to COVID-19 undermined significant progress achieved within supranational institutional frameworks responsible

for global governance in health, conflict, and migration, which had been established over the previous five decades. Now, more than three years since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic, it is essential to reflect and shift our focus from immediate news announcements within our surroundings to broader, trans-regional, and long-term developments. In this special issue, we emphasize the nexus between migration and COVID-19 to capture some of the significant shifts initiated or catalyzed by the pandemic.

Even in non-pandemic times, migration presents numerous challenges for researchers and politicians alike. Depending on various individual factors such as aspirations, gender, class, age, legal status, and access to national migration systems, as well as broader structural conditions like political instability, forced displacement, and macroeconomic trends, migration flows and outcomes are often mixed at best. Given that COVID-19 infections spread through people's movements and ultimately rendered hundreds of millions immobile, the contributions in this collection concentrate on highly mobile people, including internally displaced people (Jaehn, 2023, this issue), refugees (Abd Jalil & Hoffstaedter, 2023, and Prabaningtyas et al., 2023, this issue), and international students (Missbach & Purdey, 2023, this issue), as well as researchers and labor migrants (Cusripituck & Yamabhai, 2023, this issue). Recognizing the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to study disruptions in migration and mobility, this special issue explores topics and trends that have been insufficiently addressed thus far. While the contributions in this collection primarily examine the limitations, restrictions, and challenges brought about by the pandemic and the responses to it, some also highlight new possibilities and opportunities (see Cusripituck & Yamabhai, 2023, and Stange et al., 2023, this issue).

When studying the migration-COVID-19 nexus in specific locations, Southeast Asia invites such engagement for various reasons. Southeast Asian societies exhibit high levels of both domestic (mainly rural-to-urban) and international mobility (mostly from 'poor' to 'rich' countries). For many Southeast Asians, short-term and long-lasting migration has become an integral part of life, if not a way of life itself. Southeast Asia plays a crucial role as a major exporter of temporary migrant labor, particularly to the Middle East and other parts of Asia such as Korea, Taiwan, and Japan (Foley & Piper, 2021; Palmer, 2016). Even intra-regional labor migration, such as from Indonesia to Malaysia or from the Philippines and Thailand to Singapore, holds significant importance. Without the influx of international labor migrants and rural-to-urban migrants, who are willing to take up 3-D (difficult, dangerous, and demeaning) jobs at low pay, Southeast Asian metropoles would be smaller and less vibrant. Moreover, many essential sectors like hospitality, healthcare, construction, retail, and agriculture would suffer from labor shortages. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, Southeast Asian countries hosted approximately 10 million international migrants, nearly half of whom were women, working outside their countries of birth (ILO, 2020a; Ullah, 2022). The recruitment of labor migrants and the facilitation of their movement have become substantial sources of revenue for states and their associates,[1] not to mention the remittances sent back by migrants to their families

1 Moreover, the migration industry relies largely on private agencies and their brokerage services for recruitment, facilitation of migration, and surveillance of labour migrants.

and communities in their countries of origin. Unlike migration linked to long-term integration or settlement in liberal democratic states of the Global North, a significant portion of low-skilled migration in Southeast Asia is limited to temporary employment, with little to no pathways to full and permanent integration (Yeoh, 2022). The inherent transience of labor and other forms of migration became the weak point of these migration systems once COVID-19 disrupted the usual dynamics of migration and mobility, a topic extensively discussed by the contributors of this issue.

Beside vibrant labor migration, Southeast Asia has one of the highest rates of internal displacement globally, not only due to natural and human-induced environmental disasters (Miller & Douglas, 2018), but also due to ethnic, religious, and social conflict. The exodus of close to one million Rohingya, an ethnic-religious minority from Myanmar, to Bangladesh in 2017 and their subsequent secondary movements to Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia is the most crucial forced displacement in the region, but by far not the only one. Despite open conflict, ongoing tensions, and political instability, some Southeast Asian countries have also become hosts for other extra-regional forced migrants, for example from Afghanistan, Somalia, and the Middle East. In particular, Malaysia and Thailand have been accommodating tens of thousands of refugees, asylum seekers, and also undocumented (forced) migrants, often living under precarious circumstances for protracted periods of time (Koizumi & Hoffstaedter, 2015; Missbach, 2015; Stange et al., 2019). Given the lasting unwillingness to become signatories to the 1951 International Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol, as well as the disregard for protection claims issued by asylum seekers, those people are often just categorized as 'irregular/illegal' migrants by the receiving states (Kneebone et al., forthcoming).

Keeping in mind Southeast Asia's heterogeneous migrant population in terms of ethnic-religious affiliations, educational and skills levels, earning capacities, and general needs, it is important to acknowledge the range of their legal statuses, social acceptance, and (trans-)local embeddedness. In handling COVID-19 infections, treatment and prevention have been closely intertwined with these three factors. It was hardly surprising to see that the virus succeeded in hurting mostly those who were already vulnerable, as they carried the wrong legal label, lacked strong social contacts, and lived at the margins of the host society (Schmidt-Sane et al., 2020). Considering the many ruptures brought by the pandemic, it is necessary to explore and analyze from various perspectives the intersections between COVID-19 and migrants in or from Southeast Asia, as well as the mid- to long-term transformations of the norms, practices, and experiences of migration and mobility within Southeast Asia and beyond.

Aside from those migration-related factors that make Southeast Asia a productive site for the study of the migration-COVID-19 nexus, it is important not to lose track of other crucial developmental features that impacted the progression and handling of the pandemic. Southeast Asian countries occupy various positions along the development spectrum. The 'poorer' ones are known to have been struggling prior to the pandemic in terms of economic disparities and inadequate infrastructures, such as limited access to healthcare and education, clean water, and electricity, in addition to large-scale unemployment and poverty. The enormous discrepancies in the public and private healthcare systems are undeniable. The underfunding of the public healthcare sector has had many negative repercussions for large segments

of the population throughout the early stages of the pandemic when denial of the existence of the pandemic and underreporting of infections and death rates were particularly widespread. To some extent, even the more affluent countries with better public provisions have been weathered by various earlier crises, including the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, and the 2008 Global Financial Crisis.

Previous crisis encounters may have shaped the way some Southeast Asian governments dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 was not the only "frightening enemy" (Grundy-Warr & Li, 2020, p. 499), but the pandemic was used as justification by the authoritarian government in Myanmar to claim extraordinary powers (Jaehn, 2023, this issue), to legitimize an increasingly securitized response to immigration in Malaysia (Abd Jalil & Hoffstaedter, 2023, this issue; Khanna, 2020), and to bust union activists in Cambodia (HWR, 2022). In some cases, perhaps, the state's anti-COVID-19 measures proved to be more fatal than the actual infection by the virus.

LESSONS LEARNED SO FAR

A general tenor across the social sciences is that the COVID-19 pandemic has further aggravated pre-existing injustices, prejudices, and inequalities, including (im)mobility inequalities (Avalos & Moussawi, 2023; De Genova, 2021; Jensen, 2021; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2022; Muhammad & Zanker, 2021; Velasco, 2021; Ye, 2021). COVID-19 attested that both "mobility but also immobility can be used as a kind of capital (in the Bourdieuan sense), a right and resource that not everyone enjoys and has access to" (Salazar, 2021, p. 12). Based on our systematic yet highly selective readings of publications covering COVID-19 and issues of migration and mobility, we delineated the following sub-themes and observations that support this notion of amplification of global inequalities due to the pandemic, and which are also highly relevant for our more specific deliberations on the impacts of COVID-19 on migration and mobility in Southeast Asia, featured in this special issue.

Re-bordering

Confronted with the rapid spread of a viral disease, governments worldwide implemented various migration management measures, such as border closures, travel restrictions, and lockdowns to prevent or mitigate the spread of the virus. As of 23 March, 2022, at least 174 countries had implemented travel bans, border closures, and other mobility restrictions (IOM, 2020). These stern mobility restrictions at subnational, national, and international levels led to a process of re-bordering, where previously diminished or relaxed borders reemerged and became more rigid, and borders that were already heavily guarded before the pandemic became further militarized (Suhardiman et al., 2021). The global sense of emergency, rooted in the labeling of cross-border movements as a health risk, gave rise to new forms of migration governance, manifested in unprecedented global lockdowns. Flights were grounded, people stayed at home, and freedom of movement came to an abrupt halt, at least for very many individuals.

While most observers noted the "great immobility" brought about by COVID-19, the significant rush of individuals returning home triggered by the pandemic should not be overlooked. Xiang Biao introduced the concept of "shock mobilities" early on, referring to "sudden human movements in response to acute disruptions" (Xiang, 2021, p. 1). Some Global North countries spared no expenses or efforts to evacuate and rescue their citizens stranded in holiday destinations or work placements abroad. Meanwhile, many labor migrants from the Global South had to fend for themselves (Stange et al., 2023, this issue). Some individuals walked or cycled hundreds of kilometers just to reach their homes, with many of them dying on their way (Pandey, 2020). Between late March 2020, after the Indian government announced a nationwide lockdown, and late May 2020, 7.5 million domestic Indian migrants flocked back to their homes (Xiang, 2021).

Shock mobility encompasses degrees of forced migration but typically lasts only briefly. However, there have been cases where shock mobility resulted into more protracted forced migration. News reports revealed that an Indonesian crew was forced to stay at sea for 13 months and continue fishing before being allowed to disembark in South Korea (Carvalho, 2020). During this extended voyage, four crew members died, with three of them being dumped overboard without any official report or investigation into the cause of their deaths. The surviving crew members were repatriated to Indonesia and left waiting for unpaid wages. They were unable to seek compensation for their outstanding wages, despite international laws that, at least in theory, stipulate the right of migrant workers to receive unpaid wages. This extreme case illustrates the common treatment of deported or repatriated migrant workers, which was further exacerbated during the pandemic. Globally, between 150,000 and 200,000 seafarers were trapped on board ships as of June 2020 due to port closures (ILO, 2020b).

While border closures were justified as being in the interest of everyone and held the promise of future freedom (Heller, 2021), the reality was that borders were not as impenetrable as often portrayed by politicians and decision-makers. Only "essential" border crossings were allowed to uphold basic services such as healthcare and food production, as well as crucial sectors like agriculture and transport (Guild, 2020). The sudden and, in many cases, complete closure of national and sub-national borders due to COVID-19 had severe consequences for migrants who play vital roles in essential services such as healthcare, social care, and food supply chains (Anderson et al., 2021). While the interests of the host society and its citizens took precedence, and specific exemptions were granted for border crossings, there was lesser attention given to the fragility of migrant livelihoods and the disruption to their careers and income-generating mechanisms, resulting in what could be described as enforced impoverishment. The indifference towards migrants' lives in comparison to the privileges enjoyed by citizens was striking and manifested in various forms. Fassin (2020) interpreted the differential treatment of migrants and citizens in emergency measures as indicative of a broader moral hierarchy that positions migrants at the bottom.

Pathologizing mobility and associating migrants with disease has influenced immigration control for centuries (Boris, 2022; Cresswell, 2021). The stigmatization of migrants, particularly those seen as unruly, culminated in accusations of being 'superspreaders'. As migration and mobility became increasingly politicized across states and regions, it seemed 'natural' for state responses to COVID-19 to adopt

further security measures and restrictions on cross-border movements. Aradau and Tazzioli (2021) observed that "COVID-19 has not only become coterminous with borders and bordering, but it has entrenched their acceptability as techniques of governing" (p. 3). Yet, for those such as refugees, for whom mobility was not just essential but even existential (Salazar, 2021), border closures created risks that, in some cases, became life-threatening (Reidy, 2021). Discriminatory practices arising from emergency measures turned "those at risk into a risk" in the name of health and safety (Mezzadra & Stierl, 2020).

During the early stages of the pandemic, there was not only an increase in diverse bordering mechanisms, but, more importantly, the enforcement of these more restrictive border management practices was often uneven. This was not a coincidence, but rather reflected pre-existing b/ordering techniques and socio-political boundary-making. Even during the strictest border closures, there were exemptions, and the preferences for who was allowed to enter and who needed to stay out perpetuated enduring class-based asymmetries and racialized inequalities. Elites and politicians often set poor examples, seeking special concessions for their own transgressions (as was prominently exemplified by the "Partygate" affair that evolved around Boris Johnson, the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (Allegretti, 2023)), thus exacerbating existing mistrust in elected leaders and state institutions.

While none of the bordering measures proved successful in halting the spread of the virus, primarily due to its uncontrollable nature, these measures were eventually relaxed and lifted, albeit not uniformly or for everyone to the same extent (Heller, 2021). In the context of vaccine nationalism and immuno-privileges, crossing international borders required not only passports and visas, but also an internationally recognized proof of up-to-date immunization, commonly referred to as COVID passports. In the years ahead, migration scholars must strive to better comprehend why the emergency-governance nexus unfolded during the COVID-19 pandemic and uncover any remnants of bordering mechanisms that may persist in the post-pandemic era.

Intensifying rejection of those seeking asylum

Long before COVID-19 struck, several scholars had bemoaned the "politics of rejection" (Heyman, 2012), the "death of asylum" (Mountz, 2020), and the fact that the chances to find refuge had shifted "beyond reach" (FitzGerald, 2019) because the global system that was supposed to guarantee protection to persecuted people was no longer functioning. Mountz (2020) shed light on the global chain of remote detention centers used by states of the Global North to confine people fleeing violence and poverty and thereby preventing them from accessing the national territories from where they could launch asylum applications. FitzGerald (2019) analyzed additional, non-territorial measures of exclusion adopted by the rich democracies to systematically shut down legal paths to safety and protection. The onset of the pandemic that saw abrupt border closures, therefore, provided most useful justifications to intensifying the politics of rejections towards refugees, as they were immediately associated with the deadly disease. The prohibitions to disembark migrants rescued in the Mediterranean Sea, introduced by Italy and Malta, clearly illustrate these politics of rejection in the name of preventing COVID-19 from spreading (Tazzioli & Stierl, 2021).

The hostile rejections did not only play out in the borderlands around the Global North, but also along migration corridors in the Global South, where potential transit and destination countries implemented disembarkation bans. One notorious example for ramping up border protection and enforcing rejections is Malaysia, which according to Malaysian authorities had blocked at least 22 refugee boats in the first half of 2022 alone (HRW, 2020). In public statements, the Malaysian authorities made no secret of their motivations and justified their action by claiming that boat passengers would otherwise bring COVID-19 into the country (Royal Malaysian Airforce, 2020). The fear of contagion was utilized to cover up deep-seated xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments that have prevailed for decades (see also Abd Jalil & Hoffstaedter, 2023, this issue). Instead of blaming refugees for being potential criminals or threats to the host society pre-emptively, this time around they were blamed as potential carriers of disease. Despite protest from several UN agencies that were concerned with protection of maritime refugees in distress, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Malaysia and Indonesia continued their pushbacks throughout the pandemic widely unhindered (Khanna, 2020).

While COVID-19 reactions are commonly associated with a standstill and deceleration of mobility, it is important to recognize that pushbacks and other refoulement practices have resulted in (en)forced mobilities (De Genova, 2022; Xiang, 2021). In the United States, the COVID-19 crisis provided the Trump administration with an opportunity to use health justifications to expel individuals arriving at the border, even if they were being returned to life-threatening circumstances (Adey et al., 2021). Reports of fast-track deportations to Myanmar also emerged from Malaysia. Despite the relaxation of bordering measures related to COVID-19, there is reason to believe that the intensified politics of rejection and other forms of necropolitical cruelties may persist beyond the pandemic. Tazzioli and Stierl (2021) argue that the seemingly temporary responses to an unprecedented health crisis do in fact have a long afterlife. Not least, as the pandemic "has been seized as an opportunity to strengthen existing deterrence measures and hamper migrants' access to asylum through biopolitical and spatial tactics that aim to restructure the border regime" (p. 539).

Confinement and segregation

Responses to COVID-19 have given rise to a continuum of confinement rooted in an underlying hygienic-sanitary logic (Aradau & Tazzioli, 2021). Whether embraced voluntarily or not, measures such as social and physical distancing, lockdowns, quarantine, or self-isolation were initially seen as a means to prevent or slow down infections. While the retreat into private spaces for well-to-do citizens may have constituted an unexpected and novel experience of isolation, their confinement can still be seen as a privilege, especially for those who received financial compensation for staying at or working from home. However, for others who could not afford to stay home but were still obligated to do so, confinement was not just uncomfortable but rather a punitive experience and a severe disruption of their income strategies. The affective rule of the pandemic hailed from the implementation of lockdowns, which in turn revitalized segregation patterns between those who belong and those who

seemingly do not belong to the nation, thereby seeking to legitimize the treatment of migrants differently from the rest of society. As land-based confinement spaces such as vacant hotels and unoccupied barracks became fully occupied during the pandemic, floating spaces such as quarantine ships referred to as "floating hotspots" in the Mediterranean Sea were utilized to confine migrants (Giacomelli & Walker, 2022).

Having already pointed out to the "racialized confinement" along the borders separating the Global North from the Global South (Tazzioli & Stierl, 2021, p. 539), confinement measures also accentuated segregation within by reinforcing the topographies of separation between citizens and non-citizens. In some cases, they exposed the "bare viscerality of biopolitics already in place prior to the pandemic" (Ye, 2021, p. 1895). Confinements in various spaces not only temporarily prevented conviviality but also manifested difference through place-based diversification that was heavily policed. The pandemic notably amplified forms of 'citizens-first' chauvinism and anti-immigrant sentiments, particularly in relation to accessing medical care. Assuming that migrants are problematic and difficult-to-manage subjects, for example, low-wage labor migrants in Singapore were confined to their dormitories, and Afghan refugees in Indonesia to their shelters (Mixed Migration Centre, 2020; Ye, 2021). This risked exacerbating COVID-19 health risks through densely packed forms of collective confinement. Over 1.2 million Rohingya refugees were confined to camps along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. Public risk assessments fluctuated between the need to protect camp inhabitants from sick members of the surrounding host society and the need to protect the host society from sick refugees in the camps. Regardless, their confinement often meant limited access to fresh food, medical services, vaccinations, and other essentials. In other words, confinements undertaken for precaution and safety became "the formula which encapsulates the politics of containment in COVID times" (Tazzioli & Stierl, 2021, p. 550), ultimately forcing refugees to share cramped spaces instead of being protected from exposure to the virus. From this perspective, the confined were effectively "displaced in place" (Crawley & Nyahuye, 2022, p. 25).

Heller (2021) spoke of "sanitary apartheid" (p. 113) to capture the attempts to separate populations designated as at risk of COVID-19 infection from those designated as COVID-free, which clearly echoes the earlier perception of "global apartheid" (Richmond & Valtonen, 1994) that uses citizenship and visa restrictions to police the differential access to mobility founded on race and class. Also, in other regions, confinement and containment measures were justified to support the safety of both migrants as well as the broader host society, but often required exceptional authoritarian backing in order to be enforced. Yet, in reality it was not always clear who needed to be protected from whom or who was seen as riskier transmitters of COVID-19. The vagueness supported measures that saw migrants being pitted against poor citizens, not least as those confined in crowded dormitories, camps, and shelters were simultaneously blamed for constituting a breeding ground for the virus. Poor people, rather than the enabling political conditions of poverty, were blamed for their own vulnerability and higher mortality rates as well as the spread of the virus (Mudhoffir & Hadiz, 2021).

Given that many of those assigned spaces were contested by those confined there and living in enclaves was resisted, states had to monitor their pandemic regulations and pastoral practices with different technologies of mass surveillance. As observed by Molland (2021), the focus of de-territorial governance shifts from keeping people

in fixed locations to tracking individuals as they traverse through territory. This resulted in the introduction of new mobile applications designed to monitor the spread of infections by tracking people's movements. Additionally, individuals were required to scan QR codes when accessing public spaces as a means to monitor their mobility. Instead of confining people to their homes and limiting their mobility, these measures allowed for increased agility, but at the cost of constant surveillance and the tracing of encounters with others. Permissible mobility was contingent on up-to-date information regarding individuals' past infections, vaccination status, and current test results. Those found to be in violation of the rules could face reprimands, fines, or even arrest. In Singapore, there were reports of labor migrants who breached social distancing and confinement rules having their work permits revoked (Ye, 2021).

Waiting in stasis

Next to spatially separating people from each other and confining them to specific spaces, pandemic confinement also entailed specific temporal dimensions. COVID-19 mandates produced mobility regimes with distinctly slow or decelerated temporalities (Avalos & Moussawi, 2023), which, however, played out very differently for different people, following suit with the long-established hierarchies of inequality. Although the outcomes of such measures negatively affected all people concerned by them, from an intersectional perspective the impacts varied tremendously according to the fault lines of gender, class, and age, but also residency status and socio-economic inequalities. COVID-19 became associated not only with deceleration of public life but particularly with waiting. The fewer privileges people had during the pandemic, the longer their waiting and the more hindered their mobilities. Social scientists have studied particularly the temporality-anxiety nexus that resulted from many COVID-19 public health measures. Resulting from their research in Macau, Zuev & Hannam (2021) developed the notion of 'anxious immobilities' to capture the mid- and long-term experiences of waiting associated with COVID-19 related lockdowns. According to them, anxious immobility is "characterized by a total disruption of everyday rhythms and anxious waiting for a return to normalization of activity" (Zuev & Hannam, 2021, p. 35).

Waiting for life to resume or continue the way people knew it was not just a natural outcome of the pandemic. But waiting was in fact produced and intensified through the creation of ever more legal, administrative, and infrastructural measures that intensified the experience of individual and collective acts of waiting. Over the last decade, migration scholars have interrogated the connections between time and temporality in regard to movement, migration governance, and immobilization (De Genova, 2022; Jacobsen et al., 2021). Prolonged periods of waiting and stasis increasingly characterize the lives of refugees, asylum seekers, and other irregular(ized) migrants. A core element of people's experiences navigating immigration institutions is the act of waiting (Torres et al., 2022). Chronic and cumulated waiting for being able to register as an asylum seeker, to conduct status determination interviews and await the outcome, or to be chosen for resettlement or any other assistance program while being excluded from geographic and social mobility can exhaust people far in excess.

While waiting, people are to remain in protracted uncertainty until their cases are resolved. But the waiting they have to face proceeds unevenly, often arbitrarily, and more often defies legal transparency. The temporal suspension of mobility goes hand in hand with spatial uncertainties in regard to when, where, and how people can stage their legal claims. This became particularly visible in the US-Mexico context and along the migration corridors in Southern and Central America where thousands of asylum-seekers had gotten stuck. In a way, their lockdown began long before the COVID-19 pandemic, yet for these immobilized people the COVID-19 related lockdown measures then provided the final blow to their immobilization (Torres et al., 2022). Welander (2021) has coined the notion of "politics of exhaustion", by which she refers to the "raft of (micro) practices and methods strategically aimed to deter, control, and exclude certain groups of people on the move who have been profiled as 'undesirable,' with a detrimental (un)intended impact on [their] lives" (p. 29). The fact that many countries suspended asylum registration and resettlement at the start of the pandemic shows how waiting was made deliberately indefinite, and how those countries failed in properly protecting those under their mandate.

Exploitation, (hyper)precarity and detouring

COVID-19 restrictions have widely exacerbated pre-existing conditions of lived precarity and social inequality for many documented low-wage migrants who have already been living under perilous conditions prior to the pandemic. Their precarity was founded in and exacerbated by migrants' limited knowledge about their workplace rights, language barriers, and the limited interaction with local society that increases the isolation and active exclusion they often face. Fueled by public responses to mitigate COVID-19, they, more than others, faced unjust wage-reductions and unlawful deductions for food, accommodation, and other expenses. Those defined to constitute 'essential' workers during the pandemic also faced increased health risks when conducting risky transmissions in lowly paid sectors such as health service, food industry and retail. Their lack of privilege to stay at home and live on wage continuation or special COVID-19 related hardship-allowances meant that they were not only 'essential' but indeed 'sacrificial' workers in light of the insufficient safety measures provided, which in the worst of cases turned them into 'disposable' workers who were not granted basic rights as they could be replaced with ease. In this regard, Mezzadra and Neilson (2022) speak of the 'Capitalist virus', thus stressing "how the pandemic has intensified capitalist forms of extraction and exploitation" (p. 2). It comes as no surprise that migrant workers died at a higher rate than non-migrants during the first phases of the pandemic.

Loss of jobs and income during the pandemic have further increased instability and precarity, not just for the migrants themselves but also for their families back home. Unemployment and unpaid salaries meant that those families lost remittances, a lifeline to about one billion people worldwide. Foley and Piper (2021) reported the widespread non- or underpayment of wages for essential but widely undervalued work provided by Southeast Asian migrant workers in the Middle East during the pandemic. Those with temporary working contracts are usually excluded from national social protection provisions. If they lost their jobs, they were often forced to accept less

beneficial salaries and conditions of employment, while others faced termination of their work permit and possible deportation. More than two million labor migrants in Southeast Asia lost their jobs and had to return to their home countries (ASEAN, 2022).

While risks of abuse and exploitation for documented labor migrants intensified enormously during the pandemic, for undocumented and, thus, illegal(ized) migrants heightened precarity became catastrophic. Having already pointed out the exclusionary practices directed at those who were deemed not to belong to national populations during the pandemic, some had no other choice but to withdraw even more from society and try to live clandestine lives to avoid any contact with authorities and circumventing control measures such as vaccine passports and COVID-19 tests. Illegal(ized) and undocumented forms of migration and residence translated into unregulated livelihood pathways that further intensified migrant exclusions and the pressure to take even higher risks (Suhardiman et al., 2021). The appeal to stay home was particularly overwhelming for those who did not have a proper home, as the pandemic had made them homeless. For example, many live-in domestic workers who had been taking care of children at their employers' house, found themselves roaming streets at the onset of the pandemic (Pandey et al., 2021). This hyper-precarity results from destroyed livelihoods on the one hand and "the limited choice, or even complete absence, of any substitute strategies for generating an income on the other hand that would allow them to meet the costs of living in a lawful manner" (Missbach, 2022, p. 109).

While the negative impacts on migrants and refugees during the pandemic were in many regards disastrous, it needs to be acknowledged that "even against the considerable forces aligned to immobilize their movement, or to subject them to the stringent and exclusionary rules and constrictions of asylum, the subjective autonomy of human mobility remains an incorrigible force" (De Genova, 2022, p. 143). According to Aradau and Tazzioli (2021), COVID-19 did not entirely put on hold nor substantially decelerate migrants' movements for long, but rather redirected their routes and flows. For example, arrivals from Libya to Italy (Central Mediterranean route) have intensified, while those from Turkey to Greece (Eastern Mediterranean route) decreased. A similar shift can be noticed in regard to Rohingya movements across the Andaman Sea as well as the land routes (Khanna, 2020).

Concomitantly, the need for unsanctioned mobility and migration triggered a need for facilitators. Sarrica et al. (2020), who studied the effects of COVID-19 on irregular(ized) migrants, including those who had been trafficked or smuggled into host countries in the Global North, found that the number of irregular arrivals in Europe and the USA decreased only temporarily. The authors expected that the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to make smuggling of migrants riskier and more expensive, especially for people fleeing persecution, violence, and conflict. Subsequent studies detected an increasing reliance on the service of smugglers as well as the emergence of new, more dangerous routes, with key areas of concern including transit camps in Niger, at the border with Libya and Algeria (Maple et al., 2022).

Redefining normalcy

The implications of COVID-19 presented here may not have fully become visible in all their facets and intricacies, but it is safe to assume that the consequences of the

pandemic will determine our future lives in one way or another. Assuming that the virus will not disappear but mutate and continue to strike again, a better understanding and adjustment to the pandemic ruptures in migration and of mobility might help cope with related problems for the years to come. Or in other words, "tomorrow's normalcy will grow out of today's disruption" (Xiang, 2021, p. 6). Concomitant with the need to define the 'new normal', however, runs the risk that "normalising 'exceptional' policies that restrict freedoms and rights in the name of crisis and public safety" (Mezzadra & Stierl, 2020) might cement mobility injustices for the long term. National governments, rather than supranational organizations, have acted as main protagonists in the contrivance and implementation of COVID-19 responses, reserving their hegemonic power to censor and control people's behaviors.

Rather than the institutionalizing of a new 'immobility regime', this literature review has demonstrated the majority of scholars seem to agree on two principal findings: a) that the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the unsustainability of the contemporary migration and mobility schemes; and b) that the current pandemic has given rise to the "extremes of heavy-handed authoritarian biopolitical overreach and reckless necropolitical negligence" (De Genova, 2022, p. 142). Although some argue that the outbreak of COVID-19 did not necessarily constitute a watershed moment in the perpetuation of border, asylum, and mobility regimes, as the pandemic was merely an accelerator of changes that were already meant to be implemented, some of which will presumably remain in place in the foreseeable future (Tazzioli & Stierl, 2021), others expect more transformative shifts to emerge from the pandemic that influence not only the way we understand migration and mobility but that might potentially also stimulate key reconfigurations of people's mobility rights.

So, while scholars have detected similar findings, their predictions and prescriptions seemed to differ substantially. Conformist proposals include careful (minor) adjustments. Yeoh (2022), for example, argues in favor of longer work contracts and selective residency pathways for temporary labor migrants to encourage employer responsibility and prevent the exclusion of labor migrants from national health and welfare provisions. More secure employment, better working conditions, upskilling and more social awareness are also part and parcel of the recommendations by Suhadirman et al. (2020) and Sariputta (2022). More radical observers demand more encompassing change. They are basically asking for a fundamental readjustment between mobility rights and global equality. After all, "going back to the 'normality' of mass air travel for the privileged is no more desirable than the perpetuation of the planetary apartheid for the othered and dispossessed" (Heller, 2021, p. 124).

No matter where on the political spectrum one positions oneself, a key challenge of defining a 'new normal' will be the ability to incorporate a sufficient degree of uncertainty, where living with risk and uncertainty is an acceptable quotidian experience. From this point of view, COVID-19 has brought the intrinsic "dilemma of futuring" (Müller-Mahn & Kioko, 2021) to the fore. Yet, instead of relying on forward-looking visions, reliable forecasts and more delicate politics of anticipation and ever more complex scales of preparedness in order to gain control over the future, this would require a greater openness towards living with contingencies and uncertainties, a vision that is politically unpalatable for most. But neither can we 'future-proof' Southeast Asia, nor any other part of the world. In relation to an ongoing presence

of COVID-19 as well as other future global pandemics that may befall the planet and spur additional multi-scalar crises, new meanings of 'risk', 'uncertainty' and 'freedom' will need to be coined and embraced.

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DISCLOSURE

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Indonesian International Students in Australia during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Coming Out Stronger?

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Australia is a sought-after destination for international students, including from countries of the Global South such as Indonesia. Prior to the pandemic, the tertiary education of international students was its second largest export. At the onset of the pandemic, Australia's Prime Minister told international students they should return home immediately, warning them that they would not be supported by the government if they chose to stay. Throughout 2020 and 2021, Australian media outlets offered shocking reports and images of international students who had lost their homes and were queuing at soup kitchens. Experts feared that these images and the overall treatment of international students would do long-lasting damage not only to the education sector but also to Australia's people-to-people relations overseas.

In this article, we explore the destinies of postgraduate students from Indonesia during the pandemic in Australia. As Indonesia's closest neighbor, Australia is the preferred destination for Indonesian students studying abroad and Australia has targeted Indonesia as a growth market in recent years. Based on qualitative interview data, we offer a picture of how this cohort of international students "muddled through" the pandemic. We ask what damage may have been done by the Australian government's closure of its international borders and strict pandemic restrictions to its reputation as a welcoming country and center of educational excellence. What consequences might there be for this vital Indonesia–Australia relationship, in particular, and for the future of student and broader university engagement between the two countries? Our findings show a much more optimistic outlook than expected.

Keywords: COVID-19; International Students; People-to-People Relations; Scholarships; Soft Power

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INTRODUCTION

"*As much as it's lovely to have visitors to Australia in good times, at times like this, if you are a visitor in this country, it is time … to make your way home.*"
Prime Minister Scott Morrison, ABC News, 3 April 2020
(Gibson & Moran, 2020)

"*International education is a vital part of Australian society. It brings many economic, cultural and social benefits to our people and businesses.*"
(Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021)

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia was the third most popular international education destination in the world. Over the last four decades, the tertiary education sector grew to become Australia's second largest export earner after mining. The story of educating international students in Australia is often heralded as a success, building on more than seventy years of educational movement into the country, particularly from the Asia–Pacific region. Since the beginning, this educational exchange has had both a commercial and transactional dimension, as well as a geopolitical imperative in relation to Australia's place in the world. A key focus of this paper is to try to understand the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic and pandemic-related restrictions impacted on international students' day-to-day lives, and, beyond that focus, to investigate the potential for damage to Australia's reputation as an attractive destination for international students. Any potential loss in Australia's "attractiveness" is not only associated with inevitable financial losses, but also with losses in Australia's soft power in the Asia-Pacific region. As we explain in more detail below, special focus is directed to postgraduate students from Indonesia, which Australia has targeted as a growth market in recent years.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, Australia began welcoming both privately funded and scholarship students to Australia, mostly from Southeast Asia and South Asia, many of whom were awarded scholarships funded by the Colombo Plan (Gomes, 2022; Oakman, 2004; Purdey, 2015). The Colombo Plan was a regional economic and social development initiative from a group of Commonwealth nations to provide assistance to developing countries, both in the transfer of physical capital and technology and in developing skills by training students. As historians have revealed, for Australia, the early emphasis in this exchange was closely connected to an aid and development imperative arising from a diplomatic focus on ensuring stability within the region (Oakman, 2004). Beneficiaries of such government-funded programs were then, and are still today, expected to return to their home countries after their studies to assist in economic, infrastructure, and social development. As Purdey (2015, p. 115) has written elsewhere, Australia's first program of educational assistance for Indonesians included a small number of fellowships first offered in late 1948, following a goodwill mission to meet the leaders of the republican movement. The first fellows arrived in December the following year. As David Lowe (2003) has described, Indonesia's strategic importance in the region and this existing relationship meant it was immediately designated a key participant in the Colombo Plan, even though

it was not a member of the Commonwealth. In the first decade of the program in Australia, Indonesians made up one of the largest cohorts, peaking in 1955/1956 with an intake of 220 students out of a total of 675 Colombo Plan arrivals (Auletta, 2000). We argue that this special relationship first established in the post-war years lasts until today, carried through in Australia's present-day scholarships program, the Australia Awards. Whilst these government-funded programs now account for a tiny portion of Australia's international student enrolments, they remain important instruments for bilateral diplomacy with its regional partners, including Indonesia, which will be described in more detail below.

In the decades since the early student arrivals, various factors ushered in significant changes in the approaches of Australia's higher education sector and of the government towards international students. These factors include geopolitical shifts, economic development in students' countries of origin, and, most significantly perhaps, deregulation of Australia's higher education sector in the late 1980s (Croucher, 2015). As successive governments reduced the public contribution to the sector, universities became increasingly dependent on international students' fees. In the years prior to the pandemic, overseas student fees were the largest source of revenue growth for Australian universities, growing as a proportion of total revenue from 17.5% in 2010 to 27.3% in 2019 (Ferguson & Spinks, 2021).

By the time the pandemic hit, education had developed into a very strong export market that was highly professionalized and deeply embedded within Australia's domestic economy. From 2010 to 2019, overseas student enrolment across all levels in Australia grew at an average rate of 10% year on year (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020). Despite this massive growth, critical voices regarding the poor treatment of international students grew louder, too, as not enough was being done to ensure international students were receiving a quality experience (Arkoudis et al., 2019). Ignorant of such criticism, by the end of 2019 and just before the pandemic hit, 440,000 international students, mostly from China, India, Nepal, Vietnam, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Indonesia, were enrolled in Australian universities (Ferguson & Spinks, 2021). In that year, education services to full-fee-paying international students and their related expenses brought in AUD 40.3 billion (Gomes, 2022; Marshman & Larkins, 2021). As one expert has pointed out, this dependency meant that after two years of the pandemic and huge associated losses to the market, "there's no other way to fill the gap" (Peter Hurley, quoted in Kelly, 2022).

The importance of international students to Australia goes beyond their financial contributions to the nation's universities; it also derives from their potential as people who will one day be the leading thinkers and social, business, and political leaders and decision-makers in their home countries, and, as such, the shapers of people-to-people relations with Australia for generations to come. It is, therefore, crucial to understand how Australia's COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and border closures impacted the cohort of international students who lived through it and their outlook on Australia, not only to better comprehend the outcomes for these individuals, but also for the future of the international education sector and Australia's reputation more broadly.

COVID-19 DISRUPTIONS

COVID-19 arrived in Australia in February 2020, just as the academic year was about to commence. On 1 February, Australia placed restrictions on arrivals from China, which severely affected international students from China and Hong Kong, many of whom had not yet returned to Australia from Chinese New Year holidays at home. With these students no longer permitted to enter the country, Australian universities and other educational institutions were forced to turn to online teaching and learning to deliver their courses to students stranded overseas (Amelia et al., 2021). As scholars have pointed out, for students in China this was not a simple shift, with many facing considerable difficulty in accessing their online courses because of China's Great Firewall (Hope & Sullivan, 2020).

As COVID-19 spread and was declared a pandemic, Australia closed its international borders on 19 March 2020 to all non-citizens and non-residents. Universities halted their onsite operations entirely as the country entered a nationwide 'stay at home' lockdown. For international students in Australia, the lockdowns meant that many who were reliant on income from casual and part-time employment in hospitality and retail were now in a precarious position. In early April 2020, Prime Minister Scott Morrison told international students and other visitors to return to their home countries, as his government needed to focus its attention on its own citizens and residents (Gibson & Moran, 2020). Only those temporary visa holders with critical skills in assisting with the pandemic, such as doctors and nurses, were offered exemptions. International students who had lost the casual work on which they relied to earn enough to cover rent and household expenses, including food, faced severe problems. Media images of long queues of international students outside city food banks during the initial six-week long national lockdown made their precarity highly visible (Carey & Carlson, 2022). Unable to cover their rent, some international students faced eviction, and the cancellation of international flights meant that some literally had nowhere to go (Power, 2021). According to Andrew Hughes, a marketing lecturer at ANU's Research School of Management, such images were causing significant damage to "brand Australia" (quoted in Sas, 2022).

After the national lockdown was lifted in late May 2020, the situation for students for the remainder of that year and into 2021 differed greatly, depending on which Australian state they were living and studying in. Between June 2020 and November 2021, the severity and duration of 'stay at home' orders varied from state to state and between urban and regional areas with each state. During these 18 months, Victoria's capital Melbourne experienced more and longer lockdowns than other states (approximately 38 weeks in total), followed by New South Wales (approximately 26 weeks in total). For the other states and territories with significant numbers of international students, lockdowns were minimal in Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory, while in Western Australia they were hardly used at all in 2021. Given that Melbourne and Sydney host the largest numbers of international students in the country, it is not surprising that the overall reaction of international students was extremely negative.

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In our study we sought to survey a range of Indonesian postgraduate students from across different Australian states and universities, including those who experienced long periods in lockdown. Our findings from in-depth interviews with Indonesian students revealed a much more positive outlook on student resilience than media reports and initial research have indicated. We have structured our analysis around the examination of students' financial situation, issues arising from the closure of the international borders, student–supervisor relations, resilience, and expected long-term impacts of the pandemic and lockdowns. As will be shown, while all students admitted that the pandemic caused a massive disruption in their lives, depending on their class background, their scholarship conditions, their family situation, and their overall embeddedness within the Indonesian community in Australia, some students faced the pandemic with much more resilience than others. While this finding does not undermine general criticism of how poorly some international students were treated in Australia during the pandemic, it urges us and future research endeavors to pay more attention to intersectional positions, as not all international students were affected by the pandemic in the same way.

MORE THAN EXPORT DOLLARS

When researching the impacts of the pandemic on international students in Australia, our interest is twofold: It is focused first at the micro level, of impacts on the personal and the intimate, and second at the macro level, of impacts on Australia's regional and global reputational standing. Given the position and status of the cohort of students chosen for this study, we will argue that these two foci are intrinsically connected.

Firstly, we sought to understand the impacts (financial, emotional, and social) at the individual level on Indonesian postgraduate students who either stayed in Australia or returned to (or remained in) their home country for 2020 and 2021. To do this, we engaged in 15 in-depth qualitative interviews with students to examine their motives for studying abroad and the impacts of the pandemic on their studies and general wellbeing.

The second broader aim of this study was to test the proposition that Australia's higher education industry has not only provided a boon to its domestic economy in export earnings, but also to its standing internationally. Over the past decade, in various reports and white papers issued by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2016; 2017; 2022a,b), the Australian government has consistently pointed to and sought to leverage the soft-power dividend of this growing cohort of alumni of Australian higher education institutions (Purdey, 2015). Through our qualitative sample of in-depth interviews, we aim to understand the potential impact of the COVID-19 related ruptures to this soft-power dividend and the potential reputational damage to "brand Australia" in both the short and longer term.

The focus for this study is on postgraduate students from Australia's closest neighbor, Indonesia. While students from Indonesia do not form the largest nationality cohort of international students in Australia, it is their primary overseas destination, with 20,000 Indonesians studying in Australian institutions in 2019 (Australian Embassy Indonesia, 2020), of which over 13,000 were in tertiary education (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020). Of significance for

the focus of this study, more postgraduate students from Indonesia currently hold scholarships under the Australian government's Australia Awards program than students from any other country. Also, Australia is the second most popular destination after the UK for recipients of the Indonesian government's premier scholarship program, Indonesian Endowment Fund for Education (*Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan*, LPDP). Recipients of these scholarships are marked out as already high-achieving individuals and future leaders in their respective fields in academia, policy, and business in Indonesia.

INDONESIA-AUSTRALIA RELATIONS

Our study of Indonesian students in Australia is directly connected to our broader interest in questions of Australia's place in its region and the world and in people-to-people linkages as a soft-power dividend (Missbach & Purdey, 2015). Australia's relationship with Indonesia is frequently described by Australian politicians and diplomats as the most important of its bilateral relationships – a priority friendship in the Indo-Pacific region (Morrison, 2020). For many decades before the recent signing of the bilateral Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IA-CEPA 2020), people-to-people links forged through the presence of Indonesian students in Australia and of Australian tourists in Indonesia have been vital, in part because of the absence of any significant trade relationship (Lindsey & McRae, 2018).

In recent years, as Indonesia's middle classes have expanded with its improving economic status, the number of young people seeking enrolment in foreign universities as full-fee-paying students has increased, as has the number on government-funded scholarships. Australia's long and close educational connections with Indonesia, combined with the high international ranking of many of its universities have driven demand, as has its geographical proximity to Indonesia. Although there are currently fewer students from Indonesia studying in Australia than the much larger cohorts from China and India, the relative youth of Indonesia's population and that nation's growing demand for a skilled workforce signal a significant potential demand for higher education in the coming decade. As Australia's higher education sector looks to lessen the risk of over-exposure to China's massive market, the sector itself and the Australian government anticipate that the momentum generated by the IA-CEPA will make Indonesia a vital market for Australian universities (Austrade, 2020; Austrade & Australian Unlimited, 2019).

Our study focuses on postgraduate students, recognizing their particular status within Indonesia's higher education and public service sectors (both current and future), and their roles as influencers of policy and preferences related to Australia as both an education destination and more generally for ongoing people-to-people connections. By concentrating on Indonesian postgraduate students, we hope to make some preliminary observations about any consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for this vital bilateral relationship and for the future of student and broader university engagement between the two countries.

SCHOLARSHIPS AND SOFT POWER IN THE REGION

While the origins of Australia's international education industry reach back to the influx of students under the Colombo Plan scholarships program, today full-fee-paying students make up the large majority of those coming to Australia. However, students coming to Australia for postgraduate study from countries such as Indonesia and other Asia-Pacific countries, particularly those undertaking PhDs, are most likely to do so with a scholarship provided by their own government or by the Australian government. In a very small number of cases, scholarships may be offered by philanthropic programs or by the universities themselves.

Most Indonesian postgraduate students in Australia are recipients of a scholarship from either the Australian or Indonesian government, from competitive and highly sought-after programs, such as the Australia Awards and Indonesia's LPDP. The LPDP was established in 2012 to create the nation's future leaders and professionals in various fields and to invest in strategic research and human resources to support Indonesia's development. Applicants must include an essay on how they will contribute to Indonesia once they have completed their studies. Priority fields include engineering, science, agriculture, law, economics, finance, medicine, religious affairs, and socio-culture, and awardees are able to choose from a limited selection of universities in several countries around the world, including Australia.[1] Since they were established, eligible universities in Australia have made distinct efforts to target students with LPDP scholarships, including tailoring their postgraduate offerings to match the priorities of the award.[2] Australia has been the second most popular overseas destination for LPDP awardees, with 386 enrolled in its institutions as of 31 December 2020 (Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan, 2020).

The Australia Awards scholarships for postgraduate study in an Australian tertiary or higher education institution are administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) as part of its development assistance, with a focus on countries in the Indo-Pacific and in line with the particular partner country's needs (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022a). As of October 2021, the Australia Awards program reported 211 Indonesians undertaking postgraduate study in its universities (approximately 24% for doctoral degrees) (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021a).[3] Both the Indonesian and the Australian postgraduate scholarship programs cover tuition and a stipend, although recipients frequently report that the LPDP stipend is less generous than that provided by Australia Awards. This is especially the case for those accompanied by family members, who

1 The Decree of the Minister of Finance (KMK) No. 18/KMK.05/2012, dated 30 January 2012, designated LPDP as a government agency and its scholarships program commenced in 2013 (https://lpdp.kemenkeu.go.id/en/tentang/visi-misi/).

2 Australian universities on the LPDP eligibility list are very proactive in tailoring their offerings for prospective students (e.g., https://www.monash.edu/international/global-partnerships/international-sponsor-relations/lpdp-priority-areas-and-monash-courses; https://www.rmit.edu.au/study-with-us/international-students/apply-to-rmit-international-students/fees-and-scholarships/scholarships/lpdp-rmit-scholarship).

3 With the suspension for new arrivals into the Australia Awards program during the pandemic, in February 2022 Australia Awards reported the current number was 156 students currently in Australia, with 30% doctoral students (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022a).

usually need to rely on income from casual work to support their needs. Although selection criteria and procedures differ for LPDP and Australian Award awardees, both scholarship programs make it mandatory for recipients to return to their home country after graduation, at least for a number of years, in order to avoid 'brain drain'.[4]

Successful awardees are, needless to say, high achievers, and in Indonesia's case, the vast majority are employed within either the higher education sector with the status of public servant, or in other sections of the public service (Saputra, 2018). As previous studies have shown, once they return home, graduates of these scholarship programs play significant roles in their institutions (Purdey et al., 2015). As alumni of their universities and scholarship programs, they also play ongoing roles in promoting Australia's reputation as a "world class education" provider and as a desirable country to study and live in (Anggoro, 2022). These long-standing educational connections between the two countries are frequently noted and drawn on by representatives of both countries when they refer to the depth of the bilateral relationship (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022a). In December 2020, at the Australia Awards Alumni presentation, the Australian Ambassador to Indonesia, Gary Quinlan, acknowledged the importance of this cohort: "Australian alumni in Indonesia make a significant contribution to Indonesia's development and help our two countries to understand each other better … Alumni play a crucial role in deepening cooperation between Indonesia and Australia" (Australian Embassy Indonesia, 2020). Similarly, in his address to the Australian Joint Houses of Parliament in February 2020, President Joko Widodo referenced the long-standing bilateral links in educational exchange, noting: "Our youths today are the leaders of tomorrow. Investing in the young generation will further strengthen the Indonesia-Australia partnership" (Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2020; Widodo, 2020). Our study sought to test such positive viewpoints, and to examine how COVID-19 may have altered these assumptions among a cohort of Indonesian students who studied and lived in Australia during the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

From January until February 2022, we conducted 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Indonesian postgraduate students who were enrolled in an Australian higher education institution during the pandemic (2020–2022) either as PhD candidates (71%) or as master's by coursework students (29%). They were either currently studying or had recently completed their studies. The students were based in various Australian states and also in Indonesia. While we conducted most interviews online, we were also able to meet some interlocutors in person. We issued a call for participants through an Australia–Indonesia youth network, but the majority of interviewees were found through snowballing, with one interviewee suggesting others. This has meant that our sample is composed of clusters of students from a

4 For most programs, it appears that a graduate is required to live and work in Indonesia for two years for every year on an overseas scholarship plus one.

particular university, or from a particular discipline.[5] When this became apparent, we actively sought out additional participants from different institutions and disciplines where possible. There is some gender bias in our sample towards women (71%).[6] The interviews attempted to undertake a "whole-of-life" approach, wherein we sought to learn not only about the students' experience of the pandemic, but also to understand their motivation for undertaking postgraduate study overseas, their family background, and employment commitments at home and in Australia (Purdey, 2015).[7]

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

In contrast to media reports focused largely on the difficult situations for many international students in Australia during the pandemic, our study revealed a somewhat positive picture of how Indonesian students dealt with the challenges they encountered in this period. We do not see our findings as a corrective to the overall negative media reportage, but rather as adding nuance to the critical discourse on the situation of international students in Australia and to demand a more refined approach to understanding the needs, characteristics, and coping strategies of international students. In this paper, we offer a preliminary general overview.

In general, a number of co-created/co-selected themes emerged across the series of interviews with the students: income, borders, student–supervisor relationships, support networks, and family. The two main variables that appeared to have influenced the experiences of our participants during the pandemic are based on:

a. family status (married, children; accompanied to Australia or not). Students who were accompanied by family felt more settled, secure, and less anxious than those who were single or whose immediate family members were in Indonesia.

b. progression in degree prior to pandemic (that is, the number of years they had been studying before March 2020). Students who were preparing to begin fieldwork when lockdowns were imposed and borders closed and those who had just arrived to start their studies experienced the most disruption and anxiety. They faced the need to pivot and adjust within a rapidly changing environment, including shifting their research focus online.

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5 These universities and discipline areas also reflect the data in relation to current Australia Awards scholarship recipients (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021a). Our sample includes students from various universities, including the three universities with the most Australia Awards scholarship holders – University of Queensland, University of Melbourne, and Australian National University.

6 This bias towards women awardees mirrors the Australia Awards distribution in 2020 and 2021 (56% female) (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021a; 2022a,b).

7 Sample questions included: Where are you from?; Why did you want to study abroad?; Why choose to study in Australia?; What did you know about Australia before enrolling in your course?; How did you support yourself during lockdowns?; What resources did you have access to?; If you returned to Indonesia before completing your studies, what have been the challenges/ benefits?; Has your view of Australia/ Australians changed?

Finding 1. Scholarships Shielded From Significant Financial Hardship

During the lockdowns, none of our respondents who held scholarships during the pandemic reported significant additional financial hardship[8], with one exception relating to the need to seek assistance on a short-term basis to cover some medical costs. In this case, the situation was rectified once the student understood how to access relevant benefits available to her as part of her award. Whilst some students took advantage of university offers of food parcels and similar handouts, none admitted to relying on them to get by. On the contrary, some students provided help to others, and a reduction in their living expenses during lockdowns meant that some were able to add to their savings. The sense of community among Indonesian students was generally high, often expressed through sharing meals and other offers of help.

The partners of students who were accompanied by a spouse sought some kind of casual or part-time work both before and during the pandemic. Some students also worked in casual employment to earn extra income. Generally, this work was not greatly inhibited during the lockdowns, as most were employed in sectors deemed 'essential work', such as cleaning and delivery services, rather than in hospitality, retail, and tourism, which were the hardest hit sectors. The casual nature of this work, however, meant that most were ineligible for government assistance offered during the first national lockdown. Of note here is the fact that, whilst most spouses are also professionals, most do not seek to work in their own fields while living in Australia, preferring to work in jobs with flexible hours to give them the time they need to care for their families. For a few spouses, the pandemic-induced shift to virtual workspaces meant that they could continue to work in their jobs 'in' Indonesia and contribute to the family income (see Finding 2b below).

Universities were supportive and offered students assistance when needed, including counselling, which some informants made use of. Students mentioned receiving vouchers (for books and coffee) and hampers during the pandemic, and, whilst they appreciated this gesture from their universities, our respondents did not deem it essential. Some acknowledged that their particular situation was not the norm for all international students, for example:

> I think I would have to acknowledge again my privilege for getting the scholarship and being stable regarding income ... but for a lot of my friends who were not Australia Awards scholarship awardees, they had to struggle.

Finding 2. The Border Closure Had Different Impacts

The sudden closure of international borders had varying impacts on the personal lives of our respondents, with an individual's family status and situation having the

8 Here, we would note that for some years prior to the pandemic, international students in Australia – including scholarships awardees – have noted coming under significant financial stress to cover rising cost of living expenses, especially related to accommodation costs. These pressures vary depending on the city in which students are living and have changed over the course of 2020-2021. For example, Melbourne and Sydney saw huge reductions in rental costs during this period, especially in locations in which international students lived, whilst in the regions and smaller cities, such as Canberra, these costs have continued to rise.

most significant bearing. The two main impacts were that it either kept families apart or allowed families to remain together.

a. Kept families apart
Only one of our sample of participants was separated for any length of time from their immediate family. In this case, the student had originally intended to return to Indonesia from time-to-time for long periods to carry out fieldwork in Indonesia, rather than relocating the entire family to Australia. When the borders closed and this plan was no longer possible, the student reported heightened anxiety and stress and a profound negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. In the end, a special and rare dispensation was sought from the university and granted, allowing the student to return to Indonesia and continue their studies online.

Most interlocutors expressed sadness at having been disconnected from their parents and their extended kin networks during the pandemic, particularly when any of these people fell sick or passed away while they were in Australia. Social media, particularly video calls, allowed for intense exchange and communication. A high number of our respondents reported deaths of family members during this period, particularly during Indonesia's devastating COVID-19 Delta wave in July–August 2021. Not being able to attend funerals and conduct religious rites in Indonesia was seen as a significant personal loss.

b. Allowed families to remain together ("Blessing in disguise")
In an unexpected finding, a number of respondents described how, for their specific family configuration, the closure of borders was a "blessing in disguise", because it meant that their visiting spouses were "trapped" with them in Australia and did not return to Indonesia as initially intended. As noted above, when many workplaces shifted online in 2020, spouses were able to continue to work in Indonesia from their Australian homes, particularly if they were academics or had their own businesses in Indonesia.

> It became a blessing for us because everything was online … including in Indonesia. That's why until now my husband is still here.

This student also reported being able to concentrate more on her career and studies as their spouses were there to help with the children and household and provide emotional support. Not being separated from their immediate family members at this time greatly assisted with mental health wellbeing.

Significantly, for those with family and ongoing commitments outside of their studies, such as home schooling and additional income generation, it also allowed for flexible work schedules:

> We want to make the best of it.

Respondents reported that they adopted better time management practices during the lockdowns, resulting in high levels of productivity for some.

> I could join an international conference in Europe … I even collaborate with a European researcher, and we are working together on a paper. It is more productive.

Some made a greater effort to prioritize and free up time for self-care, meditation, and friendships:

> During the pandemic … there were times when I was very low … I've tried yoga, it has been working … walking religiously … a lot of Zooming with friends in Jakarta … That's how I survived the lockdown.

Finding 3. Shift to Online Learning Resulted in Different Challenges and Impacts

Participants spoke about experiencing anxiety, largely due to uncertainties in relation to their research/study planning in the early stages of the pandemic. Fieldwork and data collection were particularly complex issues for our interlocutors, most of whom are doctoral students in Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) completing a large research project on an Indonesian case study relevant to their field. As the seriousness and longevity of the pandemic emerged, it became increasingly unlikely that students enrolled in Australian universities would be permitted to carry out fieldwork overseas (including those who were citizens of the country that was the site of the fieldwork). After an initial period of uncertainty and accompanying levels of significant anxiety, during which they needed to redesign their methodological approaches to make online data collection (surveys, targeted interviews) viable and to adjust ethics applications, students opted for very pragmatic approaches and were highly functional and efficient. In most cases, the students drew on their existing networks, knowledge, local connections, and language capacity. For those who had to break into new areas involving qualitative research, not being there in person meant they needed more time to forge personal connections via social media to elicit useful data. Some introductions were facilitated by local assistance in the field, but frequent follow-up was deemed essential to build and keep good rapport with informants.

> Once you have a good relationship with a person you can WhatsApp them anytime … but you need to meet them first.

Whilst they acknowledged that there were negatives associated with "missing something" that they might have been observed because they were not "on the ground" or "in the room", all our Indonesian PhD student informants were working on Indonesia-related research and admitted to having good insights from their previous experiences in working, researching, and studying in the general fields they were investigating.

The methodological adjustments made necessary by the restrictions on travel for fieldwork research offered room for reflection, which became an even more important part of the dissertation; in some cases, it led to the publication of short pieces (blogs, op-eds). Moreover, some students reported finding a clearer focus for their dissertation by making their research COVID-19-relevant, which made their contribution timely and positioned it well for impact.

Those seeking to undertake research using archival or textual materials located in Indonesia experienced more difficulties. The extent to which such resources are available in digital formats online remains limited. Several of these students, and those collecting qualitative data for which there was no online option, engaged local researchers to gather the material. Their universities offered specific funding to cover these costs. Of those students who still had time remaining in their degree programs, some expressed the hope that they might yet undertake in-country fieldwork before completion.

Finding 4. A Key Relationship for Doctoral/Higher Degree Research Students Continues to Be With Their Supervisor(s).

Unlike undergraduate students or those doing a master's by coursework, research students have a unique and close connection to university academic staff and their networks. The supervisor performs not only research guidance and teaching roles, but also mentoring, both personal and professional, and acts as a gateway to university services. In longitudinal studies of doctoral students (such as Purdey et al., 2015), the relationship between the supervisor and doctoral student is highlighted as often the most significant connection the overseas student forms during their time in Australia and is most likely to continue after they return home. Given the challenges facing not only students, but also their supervisors and other support staff in the universities during the pandemic, this relationship was more important than ever for international students. One respondent described feeling a sense of solidarity between student and supervisor as "we are all in this together" and an awareness of the shared limitations brought by the pandemic. For a few of our respondents, changes to supervisors were another source of anxiety, although this was not necessarily due to the particular impacts of the pandemic. Students reported some difficulties meeting with supervisors and getting to know colleagues in person, but this was largely short-lived and occurred in the early stages of transition to online learning practice. On the whole, we heard from students that the online environment allowed for frequent and regularly scheduled contact with supervisors.

Finding 5. Resilience

Generally speaking, resilience refers to both the process and the outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences. Being resilient does not mean the avoidance of stress, but rather the capability to make use of a diversified arsenal of successful coping strategies that enable a person to work through difficulties and stress. The participants in our study are all high achievers and have undergone many rounds of competitive selection processes to be granted prestigious scholarships. This success has provided them with a special kind of ambition, which we argue contributes to their resilience and the way they struggled through the pandemic. With so much at stake, they were also driven to "not lose face", which meant that failure – aborting their tertiary studies at their Australian university prematurely – was not an option for them.

Our interviews revealed that their resilience also had many other additional sources. Most students were well-connected either through religious groups (for Muslims, *pengajian*, and for Christians, church), which were a source of great support, especially in dealing with homesickness and during religious celebrations such as Ramadan/Iftar, when some students set up food exchange chains and online religious activities, such as sermons, prayers, and singing. Additional networks mentioned by our interlocutors included Indonesian student associations (*Perhimpunan Pelajar Indonesia Australia*, PPIA) and the scholarships programs themselves (LPDP or Australia Awards), as well as university-specific graduate student associations. Some students referred to these networks in kinship terms ("*Our new family*"). While most students we interviewed were very much drawn to Indonesian friendship circles – many had Indonesian housemates – for support and comfort, a few specifically sought to make friends with non-Indonesian peers, either other international or Australian students.

These networks and the personal drive of the individual students meant they were highly resourceful, accessing support and taking advantage of programs offered by their universities and scholarships program, as well as government and community organizations in their local area. As briefly mentioned above, many were also a source of such support to and for others, volunteering to provide food packs and offering emotional and financial assistance to others in various ways.

> I managed by volunteering a lot. I would go to church and volunteer … I kept myself busy.

Beyond their immediate environment, all our respondents also spoke of providing emotional support, public health advice, and financial aid to family members at home in Indonesia.

> Sometimes they [family in Indonesia] shared hoax information and I countered them with news from credible sources.

Finding 6. Inconsistency in Australian Government Messaging Over Borders Led to Confusion and Anxiety

Although inconsistency in Australian government messaging relating to border closures led to confusion and anxiety, in general our participants agreed that the strict rules were necessary: "it keeps us safe". They pointed out that exemptions to the strict rules were possible for some businesspeople and visiting celebrities, and some of them expressed a wish that specific exemptions for international students might have been granted so that they could leave Australia and return after short family visits in Indonesia, particularly in cases where family members had passed away. Some observed that international students had been largely neglected in the national conversation, despite repeated reference to their importance to the education sector.

> At the time when international students can't enter Australia, last year the Australian Open was still organized, right? For me and for other students it was

> unfair … I have many friends who can't go back and who are separated between families and it's not easy for us … we don't have a problem with the restrictions because it keeps us safe, but the problem we, my friends in Brisbane, have is that it is inconsistent and it's neglecting the needs and necessities of the international students.
>
> I actually agree with the Australian government for the restriction because it keeps us safe, and it keeps us going. But we know that we lost many people, our loved ones, and we can't go back.

Nonetheless, in discussion on this issue, students also referenced the Indonesian context, explaining that they felt safer being in Australia than in Indonesia and weighed the risks of returning to Indonesia.

> Of course, I'm homesick, but we think more practically because is it possible to come back if we go to Indonesia? So, we calculate any possibility and I think the wise option is just to keep here until I can at least finish important stages, important chapters.

All were vaccinated and grateful for Australia's free vaccination programs and that they were permitted to access this at the same time as Australians. They noted that Australians were also disadvantaged by the border control and mobility restrictions ("everybody experienced it"). As one respondent put it,

> Covid? I don't know what the worry about it is. Just a pandemic. We are not living in a war … we have our health. We can get through it.

Despite the many upheavals caused by COVID-19, the specific cohort under study here appears to have got through the pandemic relatively well, despite early anxieties, a number of personal sacrifices, and the need to keep adapting their studies in what was a rapidly changing environment. Our interlocutors found studying in Australia challenging, noting the need to apply a high level of critical thinking to reach supervisors' expectations. However, many of the academic difficulties they cited were not related to the pandemic impacts in particular and are consistent with the experiences of previous cohorts.

Compared to alarming reports of students suffering significant financial hardships during the pandemic, the cohort under study here was financially much more secure and not reliant on casual and part-time work in sectors impacted by lockdowns. The relative financial security of this cohort appears to have been an important difference in comparison to that of more precarious, self-funded international students who remained in Australia during this period. In the two years of the pandemic, students accompanied by their family had far more settled and stable experiences than those who were alone or apart from family at this time. In addition, responsive and supportive universities, high levels of pastoral care from supervisors and other staff who adopted a flexible approach to the constantly shifting conditions, were also key to positive outcomes for our research-only cohort. In general, we would argue that all our interlocutors managed to emerge from their experiences of the past two years

in a position of strength and with positive sentiments towards their institutions and Australia.

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Whilst the experiences of this cohort of higher degree students enrolled in Australian universities during the pandemic would indicate minimal to no reputational damage to Australia in practical terms, the higher education sector is concerned about what it will take to reinvigorate these connections into the region after a gap of two years with no new arrivals. During this period, the Australia Awards program and LPDP were suspended, and in-country recruitment efforts were not possible. There was a well-founded concern within the higher education sector that prospective students would choose to take up opportunities elsewhere (Arora, 2021).

Our study shows that Australia was not always our interlocutors' first choice for their studies. All agreed, however, that it was the most pragmatic choice in terms of length of program, distance to Indonesia, quality of education, and safe environment. We would argue that as international mobility returns to pre-pandemic levels and scholarship programs and recruitment resume, the same pull factors will take effect, perhaps with some added emphasis. All our respondents reported that, if asked, they would encourage their colleagues, family, and friends to undertake their studies in Australia. As leaders in their respective fields, be it in the academy, policy, or business, this alumni cohort will be of significant importance in rebuilding the connections lost between these Indonesian institutions and Australian universities over the past two years.

A CONTINUING DEPENDENCY PROBLEM?

Those closely observing Australian universities' growing dependence on international students for some time had already been critical of what they believed to be a highly risky business model. The pandemic exposed and aggravated the risks of this model many times more than predicted. In September 2021, the Australian government's Provider Registration and International Student Management System (PRISMS) database showed that commencing international student enrolments for 2021 fell by 24% compared to 2020 and by 41% compared to 2019. For all international enrolments, numbers fell by 13% compared to 2020 and by 17% compared to 2019 (Austrade, 2020; Marshman & Larkins, 2021). With more dropouts and fewer new enrolments, many university managers feared that the pandemic might have damaged the business model beyond repair (Dite, 2021). In 2020, Australian universities lost 5.1% of 2019 revenue (Duffy, 2021). Without replenishing the number of new incoming international students, universities are expected to lose between AUD 16 billion and AUD 19 billion by 2023. Moreover, with Australia's main market competitors – the UK, Canada, and the United States – opening to international students as early as June/July 2020, the higher education sector feared significant losses to their market share (Hurley & Hildebrandt, 2021).

On 15 December 2021, after months of mixed messaging, Australia's border was finally opened to international students and some workers subject to quarantining and vaccination requirements. Within weeks, however, as Australia became

overwhelmed by the COVID-19 Omicron variant and infection rates not seen at any time during the first two years of the pandemic, significant shortages within a stretched workforce and pressure on vital supply chains led to yet another shift in the government's rhetoric about international students.

In an attempt to help those industries facing worker shortages, in January 2022 the Australian government announced a visa fee rebate of AUD 600 to students and backpackers entering Australia in the following two to three months (Hitch, 2022). This policy targeted approximately 150,000 students and 23,500 working holiday-makers holding visas to enter Australia, but who had remained outside the country. The federal government also removed the restriction on student visa holders that limited the number of hours they worked to 20 hours (Boscaini et al., 2022). While welcomed by business operators and some students, academics and student associations criticized this policy, arguing that the main focus of getting students back into the country should be on their studies rather than on filling shortages in Australia's casual workforce.

Will COVID-19 prove to be a turning point for Australia's international education sector? Or will this opportunity to learn lessons from the experiences of students and institutions pass unnoticed, with stakeholders returning to their pre-pandemic focus on expansion and growth? Catriona Jackson, CEO of Universities Australia, is among those who are hopeful that a simple reset might yet be possible for the Australian market and that "the fundamental appeal of an Australian education remain[s] as strong as ever: excellent universities, high vaccination rates and an enviable lifestyle" (quoted in Kelly, 2022). When students began to return to campuses in February 2022, for some of them it was for the first time in two years. The centers of Australia's major cities, devastated during the long lockdowns, are once again enlivened by the return of many international students. In the short term, universities are quietly optimistic that numbers will return to near normal levels in the second half of 2022. This all remains to be seen, as do the medium- to longer-term implications of Australia's long border closures and restrictions on migration for its once dominant and thriving international education sector.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shed light on the challenges faced by international students in Australia during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Given that international students are a very diverse cohort and a highly socially stratified group of people, we have sought to offer a targeted examination of a particular cohort: postgraduate students from Indonesia. Most of them were holders of government-funded scholarships and, as such, occupy positions of influence within the crucial bilateral relationship between Australia and Indonesia. While the scholarship holders might be only a small fraction of Australia's international student cohort, they are part of the drive within its universities and government to build important connections with Indonesia, including with its future academic and political leaders.

While the media and some scholars studying international students in Australia (and in many other Western countries) have presented justifiably alarming reports about the poor treatment of international students, our findings, albeit from a very

specific sub-group of international students, have offered a different picture. We do not see this as a contrast to these reports, but rather as a complement to the experiences they represent. Instead of offering a representative sample, which would require more research funding for data collection, our sample is rather an indicative exploration and an initial mapping of a very specific sub-group of international students. We argue that it is important to take into account the often highly individual reasons and motivations behind students' decisions to study in Australia and the difficulties in generalizing the impacts of the pandemic experience on this very important group of temporary migrants to Australia.

While our analysis offered a surprisingly positive picture, we are aware that these findings must be related to the overall scenario faced by the Australian education sector, which currently faces many challenges in creating sustainable models for its financial future while also meeting the fundamental educational expectations of preparing domestic and international students for the future. While it may be tempting for Australian universities to simply go back to their old model of living off the fees brought in by international students, this moment in time (the ending of the pandemic's acute phase in some countries) could provide a crucial opportunity to create institutions of higher education that do not depend to the same extent on fees from international students.

Our findings reveal that, whilst financial security was the single most important factor in protecting our respondents during this period, also critical was the comfort and support provided by family, community networks, and the pastoral care and professional support offered by their universities. We would argue that, in combination, these elements provided our students with a high degree of resilience in the face of significant challenges. Whilst it is not possible to replicate these conditions for all international, or indeed domestic students, financial precarity is a concern that predates the pandemic and will most likely continue beyond it. This study, however, contributes to existing evidence (Kent, 2021) showing that students with a strong emotional support base and with good connections into local communities, be they diaspora-based, faith-based, or other community links, are likely to have the best outcomes.

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DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Access to Education for Refugee Children in Indonesia During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Adaptation Strategies

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The protracted refugee situation in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic has increased refugee children's vulnerability due to the non-fulfillment of their fundamental rights, including the right to education. Drawing on data collected through interviews and observation of refugee children during fieldwork in the cities of Batam and Makassar, this paper aims to investigate how and why their access to education has changed during the pandemic. This study finds that, shortly before the pandemic, the Indonesian government provided access to education for refugee children through the issuance of the Circular Letter from the Secretary General of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology Number 752553/A.A4/HK/2019 dated on 10 July 2019. However, the pandemic complicated the accessibility of education for refugee children suggested by the Circular Letter due to lockdown policy and mobility restrictions. The complication is apparent in four aspects of accessibility, namely: access to information, activities in the learning process, environmental support, and the motivation of refugee children. Notwithstanding, this study also finds that the pandemic has induced developments of adaptation strategies through the adoption of online learning among refugee communities to enable wider access to education for refugee children. Therefore, the pandemic may have revealed the urgency for a more rights-based policy on refugee treatment in Indonesia.

Keywords: Accessibility; COVID-19 Pandemic; Refugee Children; Indonesia; Rights to Education

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is one of the refugee transit countries in Southeast Asia. As of February 2022, Indonesia hosted 13,174 refugees; 27% of them are children, primarily from Afghanistan, Somalia, Myanmar, Iraq, and Sudan.[1] As many as 97 children are

1 In this paper, the term 'refugee children' refers to children of refugees and asylum seekers in

unaccompanied minors, which means that they have arrived in Indonesia alone or were separated from their families (UNHCR, 2022). The protracted refugee situation in Indonesia has increased refugee children's vulnerability due to the non-fulfillment of their fundamental rights, including rights to education (Brown, 2018, p. 166; Lau, 2021).

Education for refugee children needs crucial attention as an inseparable part of children's rights. Sustainable access to education is vital to reducing their vulnerabilities and reaching their full potential despite their precarious situation (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). Under the situation, some researchers have indicated that education is necessary for restoring social and emotional wellbeing (Eisenbruch, 1988; Huyck & Fields, 1981; Sinclair, 2001). Contrarily, failure to provide access to education in the transit period will cause a 'lost learning' situation where refugee children's level of education is far behind their age because of long periods out of school (Mason & Orcutt, 2018; Cardinal, 2020). This situation might cause more problems in the future, such as low qualifications to enter the labor market.

Recently, researchers have started giving greater attention to pre-resettlement educational experiences, focusing on the role of multi-stake holders, including education provided by refugees themselves (Brown, 2018; Sinandang et al, 2021), education while in immigration detention (Suyoto, 2021) and countries of first asylum (Dryden-Peterson, 2016), protection from a legal and normative perspective (Adhi et. al. 2021; Asti & Rahayu, 2019; Shalihah & Putri, 2020), and education in emergencies or crises such as conflicts, disaster and pandemic (Jones et. al., 2022; Menashy & Zakharia, 2022; Sinclair, 2002; Shohel, 2022). Rohingyas refugees, including children who are living temporarily in camps in Bangladesh, for example, face barriers such as shortage of schools and learning materials to access education (Shohel, 2022). In times of the COVID-19 pandemic, Syrian refugee children in Lebanon also could not attend remote schooling and had a lack of access to the internet (Azba, 2022; Menashy & Zakharia, 2022). Other studies revealed the challenges faced by countries in Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean in adjusting their educational system in the midst of crisis while also facilitating refugees' right to education. The challenges range from structural barriers, gaps in educational outcomes, different policies and practices, increasing security threats, or mental health conditions affected by the crisis (Caarls, et.al 2021; Özgür Keysan, 2022; Parker & Alfaro, 2022; Saischeck, 2022).

Although it is acknowledged that access to education, especially in a transitory displacement and emergency context, can give a sense of normalcy and stability during an uncertain lengthy period of waiting time for resettlement (Mosselson et al., 2017, p. 15; Kristin & Dewi, 2021), these above previous studies have underlined the limitation on access to education among refugee children. There is limited access to education for refugee children in a transitory context and times of crisis, yet, there have not been many studies focusing on educational experiences of refugee children in transit countries such as Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic and through the lens of accessibility. To address these gaps, drawing from Greco (2018) and Ribot & Peluso (2003), we present a conceptual framework of accessibility to understand

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Indonesia, who may have arrived with their families or were born during the transit period, as well as those children who are unaccompanied or were separated from their families.

the complexities of access to education during the pandemic through four aspects, namely: access to information, activities in learning process, environmental support, and motivation and resilience.

This paper scrutinizes the situation and problems of access to education for refugee children in Indonesia throughout the pandemic, highlighting the early progress of implementation of the Circular Letter from the Secretary General of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology Number 752553/A.A4/HK/2019 dated on 10 July 2019 (hereinafter referred to as Circular Letter) and changes in national education policy due to the pandemic. The Circular Letter primarily indicates that refugee children can attend formal education in Indonesia if their enrolment meets the terms and conditions outlined in the Letter, such as not burdening state and regional budgets, prioritizing Indonesian school-age children, possessing a refugee card from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), receiving a referral from an immigration detention center, and obtaining a letter of financial guarantee from a sponsoring institution. Prior to the issuance of the Circular Letter, refugees' right to enroll in Indonesian schools had not been appropriately regulated, thus many schools were reluctant to accept refugee children. Some practices in enrolling refugees at schools were mostly on a humanitarian basis (Pudjiastuti & Putera, 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic hindered the implementation of the Circular Letter. Regulations on mobility restrictions to prevent the spread of virus, including lockdowns and school closures, further complicated access to education for refugee children. Self-isolation is extremely challenging for refugees in the midst of poor hygiene, crowd housings, and limited access to health facilities (Sadjad, 2020).

This paper consists of four sections. Following the introduction, the second section provides the methodology of this research. The third section reviews relevant literature on education as a child's human right and provides the notion of accessibility as a lens to analyze the access to education for refugee children. The fourth section discusses the main findings, including exploring refugee children's situation in Batam and Makassar and analyzing their access to education during the pandemic in Indonesia. Lastly, the conclusion reiterates the complexities of providing education for refugee children and sheds light on the crucial role of relevant actors in ensuring Indonesia's commitment to provide education for all, including refugee children.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study focuses on access to formal education in public and private schools in the cities of Batam (in the province of Riau Archipelago) and Makassar (in the province of South Sulawesi) to seek more sustainable and qualified educational options for refugees in a transitory context. The informal education provided by the refugee-led initiatives will only be discussed in the context of adaptation strategy during the pandemic, but not as the main focus of research. In 2021, Batam and Makassar had a substantial population of refugee children who had enrolled in formal education under the auspices of the International Organization for Migration/ IOM (2021). Afghans constitute the largest refugee population in Batam and Makassar, followed by a smaller group of refugees from Somalia, Sudan, Iran, and Pakistan. In Makassar, particularly, Myanmar's refugees were the second largest group.

We collected primary data through observations and in-depth interviews in June 2022. To do so, we visited community houses for refugee families at the Hotel Kolekta (Batam) as well as community house Wisma MSM and DKhanza (Makassar). We also visited schools[2] that have refugee students enrolled to observe their daily educational activities and interview the headmasters and teachers. During our visit, we interviewed 6 refugee parents from different national origin (Afghanistan, Sudan, Sri Lanka, and Somalia) who have been living in Indonesia for 5-10 years and 5 refugee children[3] who were enrolled in primary and secondary schools[4] during the fieldwork phase of study. We also conducted interviews with government officials at local and national levels, including immigration officers at immigration detention centers, city education office heads, and the local task forces for handling refugees – in Batam, officers from the National and Political Unity Agency (*Badan Kesatuan Bangsa dan Politik/BAKESBANGPOL)* and the head of the Social Affairs Office in Makassar. We also interviewed the Mayor of Makassar City and the Acting Director of Special Education and Services in the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. In addition, we interviewed representatives of the UNHCR and IOM.

This research is subject to several limitations. First, our access to the refugee community was mainly facilitated by the Directorate General of Immigration, Indonesia's Ministry of Law and Human Rights, education offices, and the heads of schools. Consequently, it may not represent the whole refugee communities in Batam and Makassar. Second, the short time period for the fieldwork hindered our capability to conduct a longer observation with all relevant stakeholders at the local and national level. However, we tried to optimize in-depth interviews with as many actors as possible. We also used online meetings to interview informants that were unavailable during the fieldwork. Third, there were language barriers, particularly in making communication and interacting with refugee parents and children. While some refugees who had lived more than ten years in Indonesia spoke Bahasa Indonesia well, not all of our research participants were fluent in Indonesian or English to a point enabling a comfortable conversation during the observation and interviews. We addressed the language difficulties by asking help from refugees who spoke fluent English or Bahasa Indonesia to be interpreters.

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2 Other than the schools of our refugee children's participants, we also interviewed headmasters and teachers in SDN BTN Unggulan Pemda, State Junior High School (*Sekolah Menengah Pertama Negeri* or SMPN) 41 Batam and SMPN 48 Makassar.

3 We acknowledged the sensitivities of conducting research involving refugees, particularly children from vulnerable communities. The ethical process includes dual consent from refugee children and refugee parents/caregivers/guardians. Furthermore, the involvement of refugee children below 10 years old is limited to observation of their activities in schools and short conversation instead of in-depth interviews. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethical Committee for Social Sciences and Humanities, National Research and Innovation Agency (*Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional*/BRIN), Indonesia (approval number: 025/KE.01/SK/4/2022).

4 Three children were enrolled in Lubuk Baja 5 and Lubuk Baja 2 State Elementary Schools (*Sekolah Dasar Negeri* or SDN) in Batam; two children were enrolled in Senior High School (*Sekolah Menengah Atas* or SMA) Frater Makassar.

CHILDREN'S RIGHT AS HUMAN RIGHTS

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) of 1989 article 2, refugee children should enjoy their rights as children irrespective of their legal status. CRC (1989) also states that children are not just adults in training or objects that belong to their parents and for whom decisions are made. Instead, they are human beings and individuals with their own rights. The CRC (1989, Article 1) asserts that childhood is separate from adulthood and it lasts until the age of 18[5]. Within this time, fulfilling the right to education during childhood and under any circumstances is essential for transforming children's lives.

In relation to the fulfillment of children's rights, Hannah Arendt's concept of "the right to have rights" is a useful framework for analysis (Arendt, 1973; Azar, 2019; Lundberg, 2018; Walters, 2021). Arendt argues that refugees lack citizenship and human rights and naturally lose their fundamental rights, such as access to health, education, and livelihoods (Lundberg, 2018, pp. 71-72). Arendt herself, as we note above, expressed grave concerns about whether being human was, in practice, enough to enable anyone to enjoy rights without also being a citizen of a nation-state. DeGooyer (2018, p. 41) offers interpretation of the notion "to have rights" as to "participate in staging, creating, and sustaining (through protest, legislation, collective action, or institution building) a common political world where the ability to legitimately claim and demand rights becomes a possibility for everyone". However, in reality, refugee rights' protection remains dependent on third countries' regulations and policies, as no international organizations could provide sustainable conditions to uphold human rights - only the nation-state (Boehm, 2015). Drawing upon Arendt's concept and interpretations as well as Indonesia's obligations under international law, Indonesia is the primary duty-bearer to accommodate and facilitate the fulfillment of children's rights, including education.

ACCESSIBILITY TO EDUCATION

The concept of accessibility can be used to understand the fulfillment of refugees' rights to education. Greco (2016) argued that accessibility can be interpreted as a proactive principle for the achievement of human rights. In the context of a nation-state, it is necessary for the state as the duty bearer to specify access as an essential condition for satisfying the fulfillment of human rights for any person under its jurisdiction (Greco, 2016, p. 11; Broderick, 2020). Further, in the context of education, Greco (2018, 2019) also called for a systematic approach to the practice(s) of teaching and learning accessibility in which it accommodates the essential parts of accessibility, including: acknowledgment of human diversity, active participation to create an inclusive social environment, universal account of access, and user-centered approaches.

Access refers to all the ways a person can get benefit, including access to information. Accessibility and availability depend on approach, action, and organization. Ribot and Peluso (2003, 153-154) state that access is defined as "the ability to benefit

5 The issue of accurate age estimation to determine children status in a refugee context is still subject to discussion, concerning that refugee children may be under circumstances in which it is difficult to determine their true age or level of education (Benson & William, 2008).

from things," expanding on the traditional definition of property as "the right to benefit from things." Capability to access rights concerns the actual capacity of access seekers to enjoy access rights through various means inherent in the system. The combination of rights and abilities requires that accessibility concerns three dimensions: availability to all without legal or other discrimination, easy access without physical barriers, and no economic conditions that limit or deny enjoyment or benefits (Ribot & Peluso, 2003; Dio, 2016). Building on these dimensions, access can also be interpreted as the ability to access, which can arise or affect social relationships that limit or allow for the benefits of resources. Accessibility is also the process of obtaining a benefit either directly or through any individual, organization or group of individuals and maintaining that influence over time to benefit from resources or services (Ribot & Peluso, 2003). Accessibility can be obtained through regulating the availability of information to enroll in public schools, affirmative regulation, and a supportive environment.

Drawing from these thoughts on accessibility, this paper develops a framework of accessibility to education for refugee children in Indonesia particularly during pandemic times, consisting of four essential elements: access to information, educational activities and learning processes, environmental support, and motivation.

Access to Information

The availability of information is fundamental to providing education for refugee children. Information must be delivered through accessible channels for refugees and easily understood by refugees. Okai (2019) emphasizes theory of justice and equality that information should be available to all users. The information available in the context of refugees is not only to ensure that there is information, but the refugees must also understand the information. Due to their socio-cultural vulnerability, refugees are prone to language and cultural barriers (Mavhura et al., 2017). Differences in values, norms, and practices between the refugee-origin areas and their new host communities can cause different interpretations of information. They may lead to discrimination and exclusion from participation in social and community life. This phenomenon can also cause refugee parents and children to be reluctant to access education despite the available access.

Educational Activities and Learning Processes

Teaching methods can make the learning environment more accessible to all refugee children students, who have a wide range of physical, cognitive, emotional, and psychological abilities (Tyrer & Fazel, 2014). During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was important for educators to innovate the learning environment to engage students in educational activity and give them many opportunities to demonstrate their learning. Inclusive pedagogy, developed at the University of Chicago, indicates there are at least three processes to make education accessible to refugee children (The University of Chicago, n.d). First, provide lessons in different means of representation. Based on the premise that learners access information differently, this principle encourages flexible ways to present information. Second, facilitate students to actively

demonstrate their understanding in different ways. Third, enable students to connect with content and problem processes, and actively engage in group work.

Environmental Support for Education

Lauria (2017) indicates that transforming the environment (material and social) towards human capacity affects individual behavior. Environmental accessibility is a collective resource that can increase the social capital of a community to provide value to the members of the community. It is not only limited to products, services, and environments that can be accessed and used but includes the role of policies, structures, technology, and production and distribution processes (UNDESA, 2013). It means support from surroundings including family and the refugee community, schools, international agencies, and government in terms of material aspects such regulation, educational facilities, financial support for transport and other costs, as well as immaterial aspects such as encouragement and social receptiveness. Therefore, the environment is not a neutral space but always affects and is influenced by involved actors.

Motivation to Pursue Education

The ability of social adaptation may affect the refugees' views and perception of what is happening around them and what matters to them, including the urgency and importance of taking education for their children. Refugees often find it hard to adapt socially to new environments, which may affect their motivation to access education. The adaptation process depends on how the 'social pocket' containing the original culture, habitus, and belief system can be practiced in a new location (Bailey, 2017; Obiezu, 2019). It also relies on how refugees perceive the attitude of receiving communities, which may be reluctant (Wong-Rieger & Quintana, 1987) or more open and receptive (Birman et al., 2005) towards the presence of refugee communities. In addition, Reinhardt et al. (2021) identified that the individual motivations of refugee children greatly affect their survival. Language ability, cognitive function, and sociodemographic factors such as gender and country of residence affect the retention of refugee students during online studies.

THE SITUATION OF EDUCATION ACCESS FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN IN BATAM AND MAKASSAR

Good practices to provide formal education for refugee children in Makassar and Batam existed prior to the pandemic. In Makassar, some formal schools have provided education access for refugees even before the issuance of the Circular Letter. The education of refugee children in formal schools has been carried out and became one of the points in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between IOM and the Makassar City Government on 21 September 2015 (Syahrul, 2019). Following this MoU, several formal schools were ready to accept refugee students at the elementary level, whose studies would be funded by IOM (Gabiella & Putri, 2018). Meanwhile, the first intake of refugee children to formal schools in Batam was in January 2020. The

head of the Batam City Education Office (interviewed on 14 June 2022) stated that the Circular Letter legitimizes their cooperation with IOM, which had previously asked public schools in Batam to accept refugee children with no success.

International agencies such as UNHCR and IOM have given financial assistance and initiated programs to ensure refugee children's access to education. However, UNHCR Indonesia has limited capabilities in educational assistance for refugees, which then gives IOM space, with greater financial support, to carry out this assistance (interview with UNHCR staff in Tanjung Pinang and Makassar, 23-24 June 2022). Therefore, in both cities, we found that most refugee children attending formal schools were receiving IOM assistance. Based on an interview with the IOM Coordinator for the Eastern Indonesia Region in Makassar (23 June 2022), IOM provided special staff and funding to support the provision of access to education for refugee children. Refugee dependency on international agencies is unavoidable since refugees in Indonesia have limited access to economic opportunities and resources to become more self-sufficient.

The IOM plays an important role for refugee students, schools and government officials alike. Based on several interviews with refugee parents in both cities, they rely on IOM to start the school search process, negotiate administrative requirements and costs with schools, find alternative funding and finance school needs, buy school supplies, discuss educational developments and resolve problems if children have difficulties in school. Meanwhile, schools rely on IOM as a bridge between schools, parents, and students with language barriers and other access limitations due to their refugee status (interviews with headmasters and teachers at schools, 13-24 June 2022). From interviews with the heads of city education offices in Batam and Makassar (14 and 22 June 2022), they rely on IOM to obtain up-to-date data on the profile of refugee children and actively involve IOM in developing appropriate educational programs for refugee children. Previously, IOM has also cooperated with a local non-governmental organization in Makassar to prepare educational program curricula for refugee children aged 6 to 18 and organize non-formal language courses by bringing in on-call teachers from outside or from among refugees who have mastered Bahasa Indonesia at the community housing facilities (interview with IOM Coordinator for Indonesian Eastern Region, 22 June 2022; Syahrul, 2019).

However, the practice of enrolling refugee children in schools continues to face obstacles, such as limited financial support, language proficiency, unclear mechanism for class placement, the absence of a formal certificate after study completion, and lack of support from family (interviews with refugee parents and headmaster of schools, 15-24 June 2022). The official declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic in mid-March 2020 added to existing obstacles, as it saw in-school learning shift to remote learning. According to our interviews with IOM staff in Batam (18 June 2022), COVID-19 is one of the determining factors causing refugee children to stop accessing formal education. Other factors are (1) parents and refugee unreadiness due to lacking proficiency in Bahasa Indonesia; (2) a prevailing mindset that their stay in Indonesia is temporary; (3) availability of informal classes, including those provided by IOM and from the refugee-led initiatives; and (4) political factors, including that refugee children were sometimes involved with their parents' demonstrations during school time.

During the pandemic, Batam and Makassar still conducted learning for all students, including refugee children scattered in many places within the two cities. The National and Political Unity Agency of Batam City (15 June 2022) reported that until November 2021, there had been 484 refugees from eight countries living in the area, mainly from Afghanistan. The Head of the Batam Education Office (14 June 2022) stated that the overall number of school-age refugee children (3 to 18 years) is 97. Meanwhile, data from the IOM as of June 2022 confirms that 43 children are enrolled in Batam's public schools (*see* Table 1). Following up on the issuance of the Circular Letter, shortly before the Pandemic, the Batam City Government assigned primary and secondary schools near their residential areas to accept refugee children as students (Interview with the Head of the Batam City Education Office, 14 June 2022). They were enrolled from January 2020 in four assigned public schools: (1) Anggrek II Early Childhood Education Center, (2) State Elementary School (Sekolah Dasar Negeri/ SDN) Lubuk Baja 2, (3) SDN Lubuk Baja 5 and (4) State Special Schools. It should be noted that until June 2022, three refugee children were enrolled in State Junior High School (*Sekolah Menengah Pertama Negeri*/ SMPN) 41 Batam. However, the headmaster disclosed their absence during the learning period (interviewed on 14 June 2022). Later, IOM confirmed that two of them had moved to another city as part of the resettlement process to a third country and some lost their motivation to go to school due to language barriers (personal communication on 14 June 2022).

Profile	Batam	Makassar
Total number of enrollments	45	173
Country of Origin	Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Iraq	Afghanistan, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan
Level of Education		
• PAUD	28	72
• primary school	17	73
• secondary school (junior and senior high school)	-	28

Table 1. Profile of refugee children active enrollment in formal education in Batam and Makassar (own data compilation)

As of April 2022, there were 1,536 refugees consisting of 1,181 men and 355 women who lived in more than 20 refugee shelters throughout Makassar (IOM Makassar, 2022), a city of some 1.5 million people (Statistics of Makassar City, 2021). IOM Makassar (2022) stated there are 173 children in Makassar, which consists of 72 children in early childhood and kindergarten, 73 in elementary schools, 18 in junior high schools, and 10 in Senior High School. According to IOM data, schools that have enrolled most refugee students in Makassar are private schools, namely Cornerstone (preschool and elementary school) and Senior High School (*Sekolah Menengah Atas*/ SMA) Frater. In addition, the incumbent Mayor of Makassar (interviewed on 21 June 2022) even initiated a discussion with universities in Makassar to explore the opportunity for local universities to open their access to refugee children (see also Missbach et. al, 2018).

ACCESS TO EDUCATION FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN IN BATAM AND MAKASSAR DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Due to the World Health Organization (WHO)'s declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020, the Indonesian government made several adjustments regarding educational activities (*see* Figure 1). The Ministry of Education issued the regulation on the Large-Scale Social Restriction (*Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar*-PSBB) under Government Regulation Number 21/2020. Through this policy, the government stipulated several restrictions for activities in public places and facilities, including the closure of schools and workplaces. The derivative regulation issued by the Regulation of the Minister of Health (*Peraturan Menteri Kesehatan*-PMK) Number 9/2020 also regulated school closure (Article 13). According to the regulation, school closure entails substituting in-school teaching and learning processes with home-based education using the most effective media, either through their laptop or handphone as the main devices to access education (Giatman et al, 2020; Huwaidi et al, 2021; Qibthiyah 2021; Sparrow et al, 2020).

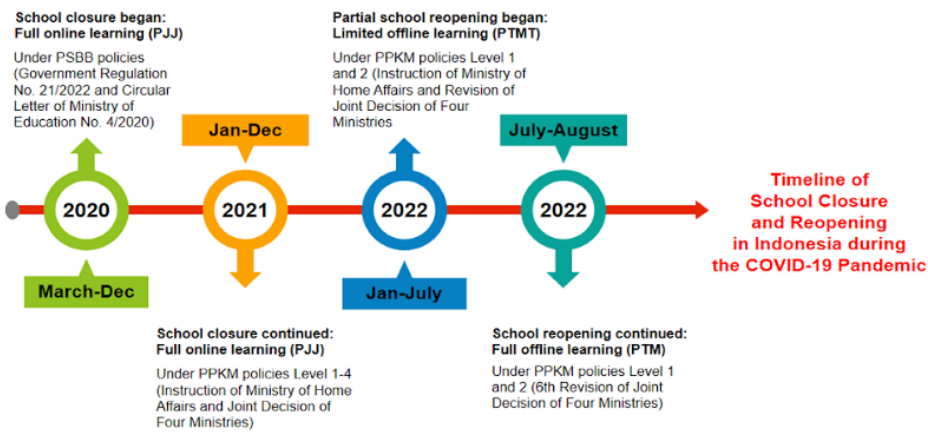

Figure 1. Timeline of School Closure and Reopening in Indonesia during the COVID-19 Pandemic (own data compilation)

The provision of school closure was strengthened by the issuance of the Ministry of Education Circular Letter Number 4/2020. This letter outlined several educational policies during the pandemic, including distance learning, the cancellation of national and final exams, and the relaxation of School Operational Funds (*Bantuan Operasional Sekolah* - BOS) utilization[6]. Since then, most school-aged children in Indonesia have conducted distance learning activities (*Pembelajaran Jarak Jauh*-PJJ) from home. The regulation of distance learning also applies to refugee children enrolled in formal education.

6 BOS was taken from the state budget (*Anggaran Pendapatan dan Belanja Negara* - APBN) and initially aimed to support expenses related to operationalization of education programs. During the pandemic, the Ministry of Education provided flexibility for schools to use the fund for supporting the needs for distance learning such as to buy internet credit, hygiene equipment (hand sanitizers, disinfectants, masks) or to pay honorary teachers (Mudjisusatyo et al, 2022).

The accessibility of education for refugee children during the pandemic has become more complicated in four aspects: information availability, learning activities, environmental support, and perception of refugees.

Insufficient Availability of Information

The Circular Letter on Access to Education for refugee children is essential as a technical guideline on enrollment procedures and specific conditions for stakeholders delivering education services for refugee children. According to the Head of Batam City Education office (interviewed on 14 June 2022), the Circular Letter helped schools to better understand the national requirements for accepting refugee children since the Education Office and schools previously depended on IOM directives. Our online interview with IOM staff in Batam (18 June 2022) confirmed the significance of the Circular Letter to providing information on enrolling refugee children in public schools to officials:

> Before the circular letter, we felt that the public schools with School Operational Funds could only be accessed by Indonesian citizens, so we looked for private schools for them [refugee children]. After the presence of a circular letter, there is an opportunity for refugee children to enroll in public schools, and the process is quite fast.[7]

The process of educating authorities about the Circular Letter greatly improved information availability and thus education access for refugee children. Previously, local education offices and schools were unsure whether to accept refugee children due to administrative barriers such as the absence of recognized identity documents and diplomas from previous education levels and concerns over accepting financial support from international agencies (interview with the Headmaster of SMPN 48 Makassar, 23 June 2022). During the pandemic, online methods were the principal adaptation strategy for the indirect distribution of information to education service providers. Relevant stakeholders remained committed to maintaining the availability of information on refugee children's access to education. Provision of information to stakeholders regarding education access for refugee children was conducted either by fully online mode or through hybrid meetings, facilitating both offline and online participants. For example, the recent hybrid special coordination meeting was held on 29 June-1 July 2022 by the Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs in collaboration with IOM on 'Improving Education Access, Productivity, and Protection for Foreign Refugees'. IOM also worked closely with the Municipal Education Department to conduct workshops for best practice sharing among teachers, as held in mid-June 2022 in Makassar.

Local authorities have, however, continued to rely on international organizations to bridge communication with and provide information to the refugee community, rather than provide such information directly. UNHCR Indonesia provides essential information on its website about the available education services for refugees in

7 In this paper, the authors have translated all interview quotations from Indonesian into English.

Indonesia and contact information for further inquiries. However, the information remains Jakarta-centric, as it does not include educational access for refugees living outside Jakarta and its surrounding regions (UNHCR Indonesia, n.d). The availability of educational information for refugee children in Batam and Makassar therefore relies on IOM. IOM delivers information to refugee children and their parents regarding options to enroll in formal education. IOM staff in Makassar (interviewed on 21 June 2022) explained that:

> We provide the refugee children with School Readiness Program (SRP). … Those who have passed SRP will get recommendation grade, and also we will make a letter to the Disdik kota Makassar with the grade recommendation and school recommendation based on location. Disdik will make the recommendation letter. But, … these [the school recommendation] only our recommendation, so if the parents choose to move or select another school, they are free to do that but of course with certain consequences, such as longer distance.

Limited mechanisms remain for local offices or schools to provide outreach to refugee communities without IOM help to deliver information about accessing education. The Circular Letter does not require schools to proactively deliver information about education access to refugee children in their areas. Consequently, schools do not see it as their responsibility to increase the enrollment rate of refugee students. Moreover, there is a hesitance to make direct communication with refugees, primarily due to language barriers (Interview with the Head of SMPN 41 Batam, 15 June 2022). Despite the fact that there are some refugees who have resided in Indonesia for long periods and have learned Bahasa Indonesia, most of our informants from government offices and schools have highlighted the difficulties in communicating with refugees. Many Indonesian officials do not speak English, a language refugees have tended to focus on learning. Given this situation, a communication gap emerged during the pandemic since IOM had limited capacity to make regular in-person communication with refugee communities. At the same time, schools and teachers depend on IOM to gain information about their refugee students.

Limited Educational Activities and Learning Processes

Another aspect that heightened complexities in children's access to education during the pandemic were changes to learning activities. Face-to-face learning activity was changed to distance learning, meaning classes were conducted via virtual online meetings and teachers assigned students to independently work on exercises in their textbooks. After completing the assignment, students would submit it by sending a photo of the assignment to the teacher, who then graded it based on the submitted assignment. Using the group function on the WhatsApp instant messaging application, the school facilitated the dissemination of information and submitting homework. Through the WhatsApp group, teachers and guardians/parents of students could also communicate regarding learning activities.

In addition to the assignment system, distance learning was carried out with meeting applications such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meets. Through

these applications, students interacted virtually with teachers and fellow students. The teacher also explained the learning material directly or through presentation materials prepared beforehand. However, online meetings require greater internet quota, technology support and devices such as laptops, tablets, or smartphones, which may not be available in all schools and for every student. Since schools did not facilitate the device for online learning, refugee children were required to provide it for themselves. In the case of refugee students, including those in Batam and Makassar, additional technology needs for online schooling depend on which system was implemented by the school. In Batam, public schools mostly used an assignment system (Interview with Head of Batam city education office, 14 June 2022); therefore, refugees only required smartphones to participate in the learning process. Meanwhile, refugees experiencing education in private schools in Makassar need to have more technological support due to active virtual online meetings (Interview with Headmaster of SMA Frater, 23 June 2022).

In practice, both distance learning systems still presented several obstacles, not only for students and parents but also for teachers and schools. One of the obstacles is language barriers, which have hindered refugee children from participating in educational activities prior to and during the pandemic. The IOM offices in Batam and Makassar have tried to address this language issue by providing a mentor or on-call teacher under the School Readiness Program (SRP) for refugee children. The mentor helps children study after school to improve their Indonesian language skills and help them do their homework. SRP in Batam provides Indonesian language classes at Hotel Kolekta for pre-school and school-age children. In addition, other schools, such as the SMA Frater in Makassar, attempted to overcome language barriers by trying to explain lessons in English since refugee children better understand it. The headmaster of SMA Frater (intervewed on 23 June 2022) explained that "during the teacher's forum we informed that there will be refugee students, so all students and teachers should adapt too… because not all teachers here are fluent in English, so they have to learn." Otherwise, students and teachers in Batam communicate through mediators, such as fellow refugee students, more fluent in Indonesian.

However, these efforts to overcome language barriers could not be applied during the pandemic due to the limitation of online learning methods. Online learning tends to limit direct student-student and student-teacher interaction, whereas refugee students require more direct assistance in adjusting to the Indonesian education system. Consequently, some refugee children in SDN 5 Lubuk Baja could not follow lessons or complete assignments despite the availability of an internet connection at their home. Many found it challenging to comprehend the assignments since their Indonesian language foundation had not been formed yet. Moreover, several lessons, such as writing traditional poems, were very localized to the point that not even their mentors could help them (Interview with IOM staff in Batam, 18 June 2022). The low compliance in submitting these assignments ultimately had implications for providing final assessments to children at the end of the school year. Some refugee parents inquired about their child's school assessment results, even though the child did not submit assignments. Therefore, the school made an affirmative policy by allowing refugee students to submit only one assignment to get their final assessment results (Interview with Headmaster of SDN 5 Lubuk Baja, 15 June 2022).

The conduct of virtual meetings also has its challenges. Headmasters of the SDN BTN Unggulan and SMA Frater in Makassar (interviewed on 23 June 2022) stated that, while refugee students were often actively involved in online learning, some had trouble with internet availability. Unlike Indonesian students, refugee students did not receive internet quota assistance from the government because they were not registered within the Basic Education Data System (*Data Pokok Pendidikan*/ Dapodik). The limited funds received by refugee parents and the resulting limited access to the internet were the main obstacles to distance learning during school closures. In dealing with the problem, the schools usually communicated with the IOM officer responsible for providing for the needs of refugees, including providing internet quotas for online learning.

Since January 2022, the government, through the Revised Joint Decision of Four Ministries regarding learning activities during the pandemic, has decided to reopen schools with the limited or partial offline learning (*pembelajaran tatap muka* - PTM) method (*see* figure 1).[8] Batam and Makassar are two regions that implemented the school reopening policy, including the schools that accommodate refugee children. When complete face-to-face learning (PTM 100%) was implemented, teachers reported that refugee children had mingled well with local children, for example, in sports activities at school. Refugee children also began to be involved in performing arts activities organized by schools. However, it turned out that only a few refugee children fluent in Bahasa Indonesia were coming back to school. Some other refugee children remained discouraged from continuing their education due to difficulties following lessons during distance learning activities (online interview with IOM staff in Batam, 18 June 2022).

Complex Environment Support

Fieldwork in Batam and Makassar revealed that fulfilling education rights for refugee children in pandemic situations required support from numerous related actors, including parents, refugee communities, teachers/schools, government, and international organizations.

1) State support: Education policy for refugee children

Indonesia still lacks a comprehensive and long-term regulatory framework to act as a guideline for ensuring refugees' rights, including education rights. Presidential Regulation Number 125/2016 concerning the Handling of Foreign Refugees is the latest refugee regulation which provides normative framework and coordinative guideline to manage the presence of refugees from abroad in Indonesia's territory. However, rights to education have not been clearly expressed in this Regulation.

The Ministry of Education revised the 2019 Circular Letter into Letter Number 30546/ A.A5/ HK.01.00/2022 on 12 May 2022. The revision contains positive progress such as permission for schools receiving refugee children to accept financial support from international agencies and elimination of the requirement for refugee children

8 This policy only applies in particular regions in Indonesia that are already in PPKM Level 1(low) and 2 (moderate) status, while fully online learning continues to apply in other regions with PPKM Level 3 (high) and 4 (very high) status.

to obtain permission from the detention center for accessing education. However, it does not specifically address difficulties faced by refugee children to access education during the pandemic, such as additional costs and adaptation challenges related to the changes of learning methods. The absence of a detailed mechanism reflects that central and local governments in Indonesia do not see themselves as responsible for refugees. Therefore, in practice, the education of refugee children is highly dependent on international organizations. Meanwhile, drawing from Arendt's (1973) argument on "a right to have rights", these children should have the right to belong to some kind of organized political community. In the context of a nation-state, refugee children should have a right to civil rights such as citizenship (Boehm, 2015). However, granting citizenship for refugees is beyond Indonesia's responsibility as a transit country and non-signatory of the Refugee Convention. Nevertheless, Indonesia can grant access to provide the fulfillment of rights for every person living in its jurisdiction in accordance with its international commitment under international human rights instruments, including CRC.

Ideally, the inclusion process of refugee children in formal schools necessitates proactive roles from multi-stakeholders (Sinandang et al, 2021) including the Ministry of Education, schools, local education offices, and international organizations with state authorities as the leading actor. Therefore, there should be a legal umbrella that can be used as a reference for responsibility sharing amongst stakeholders to cooperate in providing educational services for refugee children.

2) Role of refugee families and local communities in supporting their children to access education

In addition to the barriers to enrolment in Indonesian schools, there is a lack of support from some refugee parents to send their children to the assigned schools. Refugee parents often lack the appropriate internet connection and technological resources to support and engage with online education successfully. Refugee care organizations have not provided the required technical equipment. In some cases, language barriers among parents of refugee children have also been an obstacle in supporting the learning process, as they cannot assist their children with schoolwork. A teacher at SDN BTN Unggulan in Makassar said, "The children can speak Bahasa Indonesia, but their parents could not. So, usually the older brother helped translate the questions from the teacher." These circumstances limit parental involvement in refugee children's education. Our observation confirmed the findings of previous studies that parental support positively affected refugee and immigrant students in the United States (Bacakova, 2011; Hamilton, 2003; Portes and & Rumbaut, 2001).

Besides parents, support from teachers and schools is also needed to ensure refugee children's access to education. Teachers at schools accepting refugee children in Batam and Makassar showed their support to ensure access to education through online learning during the school closure and in-person learning after the school reopening. The presence of a school WhatsApp group enables interaction between refugees and local parents. Including refugee parents in those WhatsApp groups can also be seen as a measure of inclusiveness by local school parents towards the inclusion of refugee children in their local school. However, refugee parents rarely respond through these WhatsApp groups. Consequently, schools preferred to report any problems directly to

IOM (interview with Headmaster of SMPN 41 Batam, 15 June 2022).

Interestingly, we found that during the pandemic, the refugee community attempted to adapt to online modality by designing and offering online informal lessons for refugee children. For example, refugee-led learning initiatives in Makassar provided online learning classes. These virtual classes were even attended by refugee children in Batam, thus widening the scope of participation. It is a breakthrough in learning methods for refugees because, previously, refugee learning centers had not been established in all regions with refugee communities in Indonesia and thus the activity of refugee learning centers could only be accessed by refugees living near the learning centers (Brown, 2018).

3) Support from International Organizations: Limitation on IOM support

The pandemic highlighted IOM's limited capacity for service provision to refugees in Indonesia. According to IOM Global Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan (IOM, 2020), IOM needs to increase human resources and funding to address refugee issues during the pandemic. This is reflected in the limited services and assistance that can be provided to refugees. As a refugee in Makassar expressed:

> Before, they (IOM and UNHCR) called it an emergency situation so they gave us life support. But today we got reduced, the (amount) is down, down, and down. For education, before when the kids are not ready for school, IOM and UNHCR pushed us. They make some program, activities to integrate us with the locals and release our stress. But today, it went down, down, and down. (MM, Interviewed on 22 June 2022)

When we talked to IOM staff in Makassar, they admitted that they lowered the amount of activities due to the pandemic restriction. However, IOM attempted to maintain the progress to encourage education for refugees as:

> Most of the activities are still running but we change the modalities, so the classes are running, even some training, education…., we tried to maintain the communication. For phone, they have it, they can afford it by themselves, we don't provide that. Some people can afford laptops. For education we provide internet data. (IOM Makassar's staff, 21 June 2022)

Despite these efforts, some refugee parents remained hesitant to send their children to schools because additional expenses for supporting children to go to schools, including transport costs, could not be covered by existing monthly allowances from the IOM. They expressed that:

> Everything is becoming more expensive, but the allowance is the same and we cannot work. Moreover, prior to the pandemic, it used to be that kids over 19 years old would get adult allowance with the same amount as their parents (around Rp.1.250.000, -/ USD 79). But, now (in 2021) kids over 19 years old still get children allowance (around Rp.500.000, -/ USD 32), only their babah and mamah get Rp.1.250.000. (AJ, Interviewed on 22 June 2022).

While this decreasing allowance is the impact of Australian government budget cuts to IOM (Misbach, 2018), the pandemic has made the reduction in aid even more pronounced for refugees with school-aged children.

Fluctuate Motivation

Motivation of refugee children to continue accessing education is vital in guaranteeing the completion of their studies. Two crucial factors affect refugee children's motivation: local students' receptiveness and school teachers' language ability. Both factors must be present in the child's learning to ensure the stability of the refugee children's motivation. Otherwise, refugee children are prone to experience demotivation, leading them to stop accessing education.

Several success stories prove the importance of both factors. In Batam, a Somali girl named Serene (pseudonym) was one of 14 children enrolled by IOM to SDN 2 Lubuk Baja at the beginning of 2020. However, she was the only refugee child who remained to join the learning activities and managed to advance to the next grade in 2022. Initially, Serene's parents did not support her in going to school over fears local children would not accept her due to racial differences. Nevertheless, Serene's persistence and the fact that her local friends were helping her with school matters convinced them to support her education (Interview with Serene's parents, 15 June 2022). Unlike many other refugee children, Serene is fluent in Bahasa Indonesia. Based on short conservation during observation (15 June 2022), Serene reports that her school friends were kind and helped her learn Bahasa Indonesia and understand lessons at school.

In Makassar, an Afghan boy named Jamal (pseudonym) was one of eight refugee children currently enrolled in SMA Frater. Jamal and his father were previously denied by three to four schools due to unclear mechanisms for accepting refugees before eventually being accepted at SMA Frater. Jamal still wants to study there, although it is about 30 minutes on foot from his accommodation (Interview with Jamal, 23 June 2022). In the first term of his school, Jamal experienced online learning. However, he found it easier to quickly adapt to the learning method with the help of his friends. His friends also said they were encouraged to help because Jamal actively asked questions in English and Bahasa Indonesia. When offline learning was in place, Jamal flourished as he joined the school's futsal team, which won the futsal competition between high schools in Makassar. The teacher even wanted to register him for a science competition but could not do so because of Jamal's status as a refugee.

Meanwhile, Shila (pseudonym), a Bangladeshi refugee who also enrolled in SMA Frater high school with Jamal, did not experience the same thing. Her "lost learning" period in Indonesia had made it difficult for her to follow lessons at SMA Frater. Moreover, she had problems asking for help with her lessons because she found that her questions were too many and irritated her classmates. She felt deadlocked as her teachers also told her to ask her friends for assistance. As a result, Shila found it challenging to make friends. Ultimately, she failed the class because her language ability was insufficient to continue to a higher class. When Shila was asked about what kind of education she thought more suitable for her, she replied:

> I am almost 18 years old now, so something practical will be helpful rather than normal classes. If I want to study, I have to start from the basics, and I don't have any basics, [after] almost 10 years here [(in Indonesia)] I have none. But, practical, I can understand. Something like nursing courses, it is good. Or photography. I will be grateful for something like working classes for my future job so if I go to another country, I can apply for a job like that. (Interview in 22 June 2022)

The different experiences between Jamal and Shila show that the motivation of refugee children to stay in school is not the same across children. Motivation can fluctuate, and strong impulses on continuing education can be weakened when refugee children have language difficulties and problems blending in with their schoolmates.

CONCLUSION

This study has scrutinized Indonesia's commitment to providing access to education for refugee children before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. While formal education was for many years not clearly regulated for refugee children, unexpectedly during the pandemic (when most schools were heavily affected by the lockdowns and the requirement for online teaching), the Indonesian government became more receptive to granting refugee children access to formal education. This progress is possible due to the issuance of a Circular Letter in 2019 that provides common grounds among local authorities to formally accommodate refugee children in schools. However, by examining practices of refugee children's education in Batam and Makassar, this study has demonstrated that the pandemic has compounded challenges for realizing access to education for refugee children. These challenges can be seen through the four elements of accessibility that constitute a prerequisite for the fulfillment of children's educational rights: information availability, learning process, environmental support, and refugee children's motivation. Despite the existing challenges, the pandemic has also led to new adaptation strategies for refugee children by utilizing technology to enable access to education. Despite initial problems with the implementation of these changes and the ongoing dependency on international agencies for refugee children education, this provision of access to education may potentially signal a wider change in refugee treatment in Indonesia, affecting rights provisions other than education.

The analysis of these elements also has shown the importance of cooperation among stakeholders involved in providing education services for refugee children. This cooperation enables the continuance of enrolling refugee children in formal education despite the existing limitations. More comprehensive access to education for refugee children necessitates the role of four actors with appropriate actions. First, refugee children and their communities should be empowered to socially adapt to the existing situation while proactively seeking for educational access. Second, the receiving community, primarily local schools, should express positive receptiveness to ensure inclusive education for refugee children despite the difficulties of dealing with changing education practices during the pandemic. Third, the national and local governments must provide a regulatory framework to enable refugee children's

access to educational services so that it aligns with Indonesia's national interest and global commitment. Fourth, international organizations should maintain their partnership with the Indonesian government in facilitating communication with the refugees while also assisting with the operational requirements of the refugees.

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DISCLOSURE

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Coup, Conflict, and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Burmese Peoples Moving in Times of Isolation

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This paper focuses on the political crises shaping Burmese[1] peoples' im-mobilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. As governments around the world urged people to stay at home to be protected from infection and transmission, throughout 2021 many Burmese people protested the military coup of 1 February and fled Myanmar for safety. I problematize these movements of the Burmese peoples through the complex interplay between the triple C of (ethnic) conflict, COVID-19, and coup. I contend that, in Myanmar, adhering to COVID-19 measures emphasizing (self-)isolation and immobility was impossible as they served the military to suppress peoples' critique and protests regarding the government's coup and its mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, Burmese peoples' physical movements and political mobilisation were necessitated to fight against an ensuing political disempowerment of the people. In other words, the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic in correlation with long-standing 'ethnic' conflicts and a military coup required the Burmese peoples to carefully contest an internationally propagated so-called 'new norm' of self-isolation at home and other social distancing measures, which bore the risk of suppression and of renewing political isolation experienced since the country's first military government.

Keywords: Conflict; COVID-19; Military Coup; Movement; Political Protest

INTRODUCTION

A core question that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic is who adheres to social distancing measures and who does not. This has been associated with the question of who believes in the novel coronavirus being a threat to society (Pedersen & Favero, 2020). While non-compliers of social, or physical distancing measures are usually believed to be those who deny COVID-19 being an issue to the public health sector and humans, in Myanmar noncompliance with social

1 'Burmese' is used to encompass all peoples living in Myanmar - whether Bamar or not, citizens or stateless. This article, however, uses Myanmar to name the country as it is the country's internationally recognized name.

distancing measures has been at the heart of protesting a regime that has weaponized the COVID-19 crisis for its own benefit, and which has shown a history of using disasters and crises to punish its dissidents (Passeri, 2022). As such, in Myanmar the question is less who believes in the COVID-19 virus being a threat, but more a question of who can afford to, and who is able to, adhere to government-imposed restrictions. Considering this context, I will look at how the latest social distancing measures and their violation – from the Burmese peoples and the state – have been used to push against and for political isolation. I argue that it is the conjuncture of the 3Cs – 'ethnic' conflict, COVID-19, and coup (Simpson, 2021; Transnational Institute, 2021), and its handling by the government that has shaped the public's initial violations against measures of self-isolation and which has led to accelerated mobilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The military coup of 1 February 2021 has not only revived and intensified conflict between the military and the Burmese peoples, but also reinforced the COVID-19 crisis. In effect, the coup constituted a more immediate crisis to be solved than the COVID-19 pandemic. Violating certain COVID-19 measures, therefore, constituted a "responsible disobedience" (Drechsler, 2021, p. 577). Key to these dynamics has been the fear of losing a hard(ly) won political empowerment over the last decade. The last decade has brought reforms under the presidency of Thein Sein and saw a seeming transition in the political regime towards democracy under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi. These political changes set forth an economic opening of the country (Fumagalli, 2022; Jones, 2014). But with the 2021 coup, the Bamar majority, who had benefited most from this transitioning, feared falling back into political disempowerment and experiencing a new wave of political and economic isolation, while for ethnic minorities the crises created a situation in which it might be possible to negotiate a new social contract towards federalism (South, 2021) - despite its sufferings. In effect, the coup mobilized a diversity of Burmese peoples to organize and march in initially carnivalesque and peaceful protests, establish a widespread civil disobedience movement (CDM), and reinforce armed resistance to the military's violence. These movements appeared in solidarity with each other while not entirely dispensing with ethnic and class tensions and cleavages.

This article is based on a comprehensive literature review based on Burma Studies experts' reactions and writing on the coup, pandemic, and its consequences. I used keywords such as *coup*, *civil disobedience movement* and *COVID-19 in Myanmar* on Google Scholar and university databases as well as the Burma Studies Facebook group page to find recent and relevant articles on the issue. I further followed SEA-Junction's #WhatsHappeninginMyanmar series. This series was a weekly and then monthly Zoom meeting session, updating listeners on the coup and its resistance situation in Myanmar by invited experts. When taking information from these sessions, I cite the invited speakers and experts' names.[2] I am aware of the constraints that such research carries with it, and I acknowledge that the micropolitics and details of events on the ground can as such only be included in this analysis to a limited extent.

In my analysis, I will proceed as follows: First, I will discuss the issue of so-called ethnic conflicts in Myanmar. Second, I will give a brief analysis of the handling of the COVID-19 crisis before the coup. I then turn towards the coup and its aftermath.

2 The sessions are publicly available on SEA-Junction's YouTube channel. https://www.youtube.com/@seajunction4587

It is the coup's aftermath with its protests, CDM, and flight towards ethnic minority areas and across borders that receive most of my attention. In my analysis, I will elaborate the dynamics between the weaponization of COVID-19 by the military and the peoples' (non-)adherence to its measures and regulations. I conclude that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Burmese peoples have (been) moved to find solidarity and contest their disempowerment and the country's return to political isolation. While mobilising against the military coup, the peoples have deliberately violated some COVID-19 regulations. Yet, they did not take the crisis lightly. In contrast, they acted against the measures to protect themselves from the military and the COVID-19 health crisis, which had aggravated due to the military's response.

'ETHNIC' CONFLICT

Myanmar is a country that has long been in a state of conflict – not with its neighbouring countries, but with its own peoples. Since the country's independence in 1948, Myanmar has been riddled with inter-ethnic cleavages, especially between the Bamar majority, the military government in the centre and ethnic minorities at the country's borderlands who demanded more autonomy, federalism, and if necessary, secession (South, 2021). The Panglong Conference of 1947 gave way to hopes for a federal solution, but with the implementation of the 1947 Constitution of the Union of Burma, these hopes were soon buried. As South (2021) argues, the constitution did not provide federalist structures but basically declared the centralization of Myanmar and initiated the political marginalization and isolation of ethnic minorities. The marginalization of ethnic minorities was fast-forwarded through processes of "Bamari-zation" driven by the Bamar majority military government (Taylor, 2005, p. 280), which aimed at the establishment of an ethnocratic state (Smith, 2007). Even though over the decades the concept of *taingyintha* ('national races') gained importance in defining citizenship, which seemed to allow for ethnic diversity encompassed in 135 ethnic identities considered to belong to the Myanmar nation, the military government continued to emphasize and prioritize Buddhist Bamar identity as the benchmark of belonging to Myanmar (Cheesman, 2017).

But ethnic minorities did not accept their marginalization based on their peripheral location at Myanmar's borders. In contrast, the forceful unionisation of Myanmar has led to a long-term state of armed conflict inside the country, leading to insurgency and counterinsurgencies, to forced internal displacement and flight across borders (South, 2021; Tangseefa, 2006). It is also from these borderlands that political mobilisation against the central government of Myanmar has strived through the establishment of ethnic organizations and ethnic armed groups (Loong, 2023; South, 2021) which have also worked towards a better provision of social services, such as healthcare and education, to civilians of the same minorities (like the Shan, Karen, and Mon). These often have only limited access to such services provided by the central government (Davis & Jolliffe, 2016; Jolliffe & Speers Mears, 2014). Official refugee camps that have existed for decades along the Thailand-Myanmar and Bangladesh-Myanmar border, with hundreds of thousands displaced people, remain a constant reminder of their ongoing fight against a repressive and exclusionary regime.

The repressive military regime of General Ne Win, which started in 1962, and the conflict it triggered also led to Myanmar's political isolation globally. The US and European nations demanded boycotts of military-owned products and companies and executed arms embargoes (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung & Sarno, 2006). However, as Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung and Sarno (2006) further elaborate, Myanmar's Asian neighbours preferred to engage with the military government for strategic and economic reasons. Moreover, European countries had not entirely stopped providing humanitarian aid, investing in, and trading with Myanmar produced goods. As such, boycotts were neither coherently nor uniformly executed and the military government could survive and strengthen its role as the country's dominant power and authority. Yet, the rhetoric and partial practices of boycott of the authoritarian military government led to a semi-isolated status of Myanmar. This only began to change with the perception of the country's slow transitioning towards democracy with the presidency of Thein Sein in 2011 – a transitioning that was initiated and led by the military itself. His government's reforms led to some liberalisation and the economy was revived. Foreign donors, organizations, and countries brought new development projects to the country (Fumagalli, 2022; Jones, 2014). However, throughout, it was still the military generals who mostly profited from the country's perceived democratic transition without needing to make any concessions to their power inside the country (Jordt et al., 2023). With the 2008 constitution, the military has made sure to hold on to power by holding a quarter of seats in all legislatures, a veto power on constitutional changes, and no less a prerogative to take control in emergency situations (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung & Khun Noah, 2021).

Further, despite a proclaimed democratic transition in the 2010s, there was little change to the situation of ethnic minorities at Myanmar's borderlands. They remained marginalized, discriminated against, and in conflict with the civilian-military government. Rather than working towards a reconciliation with ethnic minorities, the National League for Democracy (NLD) government widely tolerated the military's violence, especially, but not exclusively, in its western borderlands against the Rohingya. The Rohingya are an ethnic minority that is not recognized as *taingyintha* and that has been demonized as 'illegal immigrants' and 'Bengalis' (Cheesman, 2017). Their violent persecution by the Myanmar military in 2017 led to hundreds of thousands fleeing across the border to Bangladesh, setting forth a fact-finding mission on allegations of genocide by the military on the Rohingya people ("Aung San Suu Kyi defends Myanmar", 2019; O'Brien & Hoffstaedter, 2020). Aung San Suu Kyi, who is a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and has been living under house arrest for many years before becoming the state counsellor after elections in 2015 (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung & Saw Eh Htoo, 2022), even went to The Hague unapologetically to defend the military's persecution of the Rohingya in front of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), claiming the military did not commit genocide ("Aung San Suu Kyi defends Myanmar", 2019). In effect, hopes for democracy, freedom, and an opening of Myanmar under the newly elected NLD government did not lead to a transitioning towards peace and political emancipation for many ethnic minorities in Myanmar's borderlands (of which the Rohingya are but one example). In contrast, conflict continued as Myanmar's democratization process focused on Myanmar's centre and a reconciliation between the NLD and the military, dismissing

ethnic minorities' concerns and the legitimacy of its representative organizations and groups (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung & Saw Eh Htoo, 2022; South, 2021).

As such, the Bamar majority – safely located in the centre and being the dominating ethnicity – believed in the transition as much as Western states and donors who stopped sanctions against Myanmar and returned to investing in the country (Fumagalli, 2022). The Bamar people believed that with the elected NLD government in place, they could overcome the political and economic isolation and become politically empowered. But this illusion of transition only lasted a decade. In the end it became visible that "Myanmar's transition in 2010 [was] less as a transition to democracy than to a diarchy with competing forms of government" (Jordt et al., 2023, p. 3). Instead of giving more power to the people, it "prolonged a principle of sovereignty that depended on the personal power of military strongmen" (Jordt et al., 2023, p. 3). As such, Myanmar's transitioning led towards the establishment of an ineffective two-headed government that did not work for its many peoples but for a selected few – mostly for military officials and to some degree for the Bamar people. While the government portrayed an image of a united and democratized country to its own peoples and the outside world, ethnic minorities continued to suffer under the diarchy that seemed to support majoritarian rule by Bamar interests. While ethnic minority parties formed more than half of the parties registered in elections, they only won a minority of seats in parliament and lacked political representation (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung & Khun Noah, 2021). As a result, ethnic minorities' interests remained underrepresented and cleavages with the government and military persisted. They remained the losers in a proclaimed political transition of the country.

COVID-19 BEFORE THE COUP

In their article, Myo Minn Oo et al. (2020, p. 1) claim that the Myanmar government's response to COVID-19 was "timely and bold". In contrast, Grundy-Warr and Lin (2020) argue that the Myanmar government was silent on the possibility of COVID-19 in Myanmar for the first three months after the initial outbreak in neighbouring China. The authors support their argument by showing that re-elected State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi still proclaimed on 16 March that in Myanmar nobody is infected with COVID-19. Only at the end of March, the first COVID-19 case was admitted by the government. The government's subsequent response to an ensuing spread of the virus was supported by China delivering masks, test-kits, personal protective equipment, and support for building a testing laboratory (Grundy-Warr & Lin, 2020). Overall, the government hoped to control the spread of the virus with the help of a joint civilian-military, the *Emergency Response Committee*. It proposed a range of containment measures, but remained hesitant on issuing stricter lockdowns and neglected ethnic minority regions in its response (Kyaw San Wai, 2020; Myo Minn Oo et al., 2020; Passeri, 2022).

The government's joint initial denial of the virus' possible presence in Myanmar does not mean that it did not take the threat of the COVID-19 virus on Myanmar and its fragile public health system seriously. The government immediately initiated measures that pertained to restricting the gathering of large crowds, as public meetings were postponed and New Year celebrations (which fell on 13-16 April according to

the Buddhist calendar) cancelled. Yet, the public was supposed to be kept in the dark about an ensuing crisis, enforcing a veil of silence on it. First, the government drafted and abolished a Prevention and Control of Communicable Diseases bill, containing a section that prohibited authorized departments and individuals to break news on the spread of infectious diseases if these could cause the public to panic (Grundy-Warr & Lin, 2020). As Grundy-Warr and Lin (2020) argue, the new bill intended to delay appropriate and necessary information during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the government closed more than 200 websites from independent media houses and ethnic minority organizations, caused internet blackouts, increased military presence in ethnic minority zones, and enforced lockdowns (Passeri, 2022; Transnational Institute, 2021). In consequence, the public was strategically isolated and disempowered through increased military presence, restricted movement, and disinformation campaigns led by the government. In the end, the global call and joint action for public health measures that restrict movements and interaction of people to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus served as a welcome opportunity for the military to strengthen its repressive actions towards its political opponents already before the coup.

THE COUP AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

The days following the coup, a video went viral: a woman does her aerobic routine in Naypyidaw while a military convoy rushes past behind her. The woman apparently does not take notice of the commotion and its meaning but keeps on exercising energetically while wearing a surgical mask. Being a fitness instructor, Khing Hnin Wa had recorded the video and uploaded it to her Facebook page the same day ("Myanmar fitness instructor accidentally", 2021). The video captures one of the military raids in the capital of Naypyidaw and Yangon, Myanmar's biggest city, arresting members of the newly elected government and political opponents.

Despite the military's open dissatisfaction about the national election of November 2020, in which Aung San Suu Kyi's party won with a land-slide victory, the military coup of 1 February 2021 came somewhat as a surprise to the Burmese people. Yet, the military had chosen the date of the coup strategically. 1 February 2021 was the day the new parliament should have been sworn in (Simpson, 2021). This made it easy for the military to arrest more than 100 political leaders, install a 'caretaker government', and declare a one-year state of emergency in a sleight of hand. The military justified its actions by claiming election fraud in November 2020 and an insufficient response to the COVID-19 pandemic by the NLD government (Passeri, 2022). However, the public did not perceive any of the justifications by the military as legitimate. Almost immediately after the coup, non-violent protests erupted across the country. The people mobilized against their political disempowerment and the return of a military junta. While government opposition was previously led by ethnic minorities, this time it was first the Bamar people who went to the streets in protest against the illegitimate coup and for their right to a democratically elected government. The initial protests were spearheaded by the Generation Z (generation born between 1997-2012) who knew how to instrumentalize social media to spread news on the recent developments in Myanmar, trying to mobilize more people and catching the

attention of the international community (Jordt et al., 2023). Several hashtags were invented to share information on protests and the coup worldwide; especially, the hashtag #whatshappeninginmyanmar continues to be used to spread news on developments in Myanmar in Burmese and English. Using the hashtags helps to inform about the ongoing atrocities, mobilize protest, and draw attention to the movement even beyond Myanmar.

Further, only two days after the coup a civil disobedience movement (CDM) was called to life by health workers across the country. Their strikes and street demonstrations were soon joined by workers and trade unionists from various sectors (Jordt et al., 2023). The leading role and participation of civil servants in the movement speak of the urgency of political action against a government and coup that are perceived as illegitimate (Shepherd, 2021). Protesting and striking was an act of responsibility to underline the severity of the coup's violation of the people's will and health, prioritizing the military's own political interests. In this sense, non-compliance towards COVID-19 regulations was not an act of ignorance towards possible infection with the COVID-19 virus; it was an act conscious of its risks and the urgency to act against a military that mobilizes crises to tighten its grip on power. The civil disobedience movement was an act in protest of the abuse of the military to reclaim power in an emergency perpetuated and aggravated by the military. Instead of staying at home in fear of the pandemic and the military, people were moving and mobilized to protect the little political empowerment they had won, demanding the military to respect the results of the democratic elections held in November 2020. Jordt et al. (2023, p. 12) describe the atmosphere of the early protests as "festival-like". The protests "create[d] a space for riotous performances of the silly, half-serious, transgressional and irreverent condemnation of the military takeover" (Jordt et al. 2023, p. 14). They showed not only ingenuity in employing cultural and religious references to scare and fight off the military but also in drawing on pop culture to create allegiances with regional democratic, anti-authoritarian movements. Many protest signs were written in English rather than Burmese, using democratic ideals and appealing to a global audience to understand their demands and dissatisfaction with the coup (Jordt et al., 2023). In a time of increased restrictions on human movements and border crossings, the Burmese peoples referred to connection beyond borders. In translating their struggle for political empowerment to audiences beyond Myanmar, they tried to evoke a sense of transregional and global solidarity. The Burmese peoples understood themselves as part of a common fight against repressive regimes that threaten peoples' desires for democracy and who need each other's support, especially in times of multiple crises.

MILITARY CRACKDOWN AND THE WEAPONIZATION OF COVID-19

However, these peaceful protests were violently suppressed by the military. Civilians and protesters were arrested, imprisoned, and even shot on the streets. The Generation Z protester Ma Kyal Sin, or "Angel", became a symbol of the military's violence after she was shot in the head by an unidentified security force. As her image spread around the world raising outrage, the military tried to cover up its responsibility for her death ("Body of 'Everything will be OK'", 2021). According to Passeri (2022), in the first six months following the coup, more than 1,000 people died. Even online

activism did not provide a safe outlet to protest the coup. Although online activism and protest is often accused of being performative and secondary to offline engagement, this is not the case in Myanmar's latest opposition to the coup (Wood, 2021). Online activism has been central to the mobilization of the peoples and thus has not been safer for those providing and distributing critical information about the coup and its protests. To stop the political mobilization against the coup, the military has operated internet cuts, surveyed social media accounts, and targeted journalists. With the growing military violence and surveillance against peaceful protesters and journalists, an atmosphere of fear spread across the country. People felt increasingly insecure inside the country, risking their lives on the streets and on the job. They began to flee to the borderlands or across borders to seek safety from retaliation by the military government (Aung Zaw, 2021a, 2021b; Wood, 2021).

With the CDM unfolding, health care workers on strike were no less under risk of arrest and murder by the military and many had to flee and hide from the military. In their hide-outs, they were cut off from receiving and providing public (health) services while the military's actions deepened the crisis. The military shut numerous private healthcare clinics whose employees had participated in the CDM during the ongoing pandemic (Krishna & Howard, 2021). It further arrested the head of Myanmar's vaccination program, channelled medical resources towards military hospitals, closed pharmacies, blocked people from accessing oxygen donations, and disrupted non-governmental healthcare programs in ethnic areas, excluding minorities from the provision of public and private healthcare services (Bociaga, 2021; Khin Ohmar, 2021c; Passeri, 2022; Transnational Institute, 2021). Rather than letting their political opponents help the people in other health care facilities, the military willingly created greater (health) precarity for its people to hold on to its power. Yet, it was the military that accused striking healthcare workers of genocide. Krishna and Howard (2021, p. 1) quote military spokesperson Major General Zaw Min Tun: "They are killing people in cold blood. If this is not genocide, what shall I call it?" For years, the military had denied its act of genocide against the Rohingya people but now grabbed an abstruse and obscene opportunity to accuse its political opponents of such actions. Though, it was effectively the military that disabled striking civil servants to provide health services to the public, they shifted blame over the ensuing crisis, trying to weaponize the pandemic and claiming medical inaction by professionals as a genocidal act, whereas it was they who killed people in the streets, gave a belated and insufficient response to the pandemic, and actively disabled access to health care. Using the accusation of genocide on striking healthcare workers is based on a shallow pretence that the military cares and tries to protect the people all the while it continued to attack, kill, arrest, and imprison them.

The weaponization of the COVID-19 pandemic by the military went even further as conditions in Myanmar prisons have been far from abiding to public health measures in light of the pandemic. According to Stothard (2022), more political prisoners than ever have been incarcerated in the first year of the coup. In total, around 12,000 political prisoners were taken, whereby the military seemed to use imprisonment of political opponents to not only punish them, but also to potentially harm their health. Activists who have been imprisoned reported a lack of space, sanitation, and medical treatment among others (A. A. & Gaborit, 2021; Krishna & Howard, 2021). By

not providing adequate protection from infection and healthcare services in prisons, the military government increased the likelihood that imprisoned political opponents might fall sick and die. The spokesperson for Aung San Suu Kyi, Nyan Win, had contracted COVID-19 and died in prison in July 2021 after being arrested during the coup on 1 February 2021 (Peck, 2021). Nyan Win's death is but one indicator that the military instrumentalized the contagiousness of the COVID-19 virus not only to grab on power and suppress protests, but also to immobilize its political opponents indefinitely. The policy briefing by the Transnational Institute summarizes the effect of the coup on COVID-19 and Myanmar society as the following:

> Myanmar's fragile health system collapsed following the SAC coup. Health workers were targeted for their role in the pro-democracy protests. Hospitals were raided, over 43,000 staff in the Ministry of Health and Sports joined the CDM, over 500 health workers and medical students have been detained or gone into hiding, and 29 killed. Civil society and non-governmental organisations running COVID-19 and other humanitarian programmes have also faced harassment, and in many of the conflict-zones the health care activities of local ethnic and community-based groups are severely disrupted. (Transnational Institute, 2021, p. 2)

This is not a government that expresses interest or care for its peoples' survival and protection amid a political and medical crisis. In contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a backdrop for the military to roll out a "collective punishment scheme" (Khin Ohmar, 2021a) and continue its "politicide" (Thein-Lemelson, 2021, p. 3) by targeting and eliminating its political opponents systematically. While Thein-Lemelson (2021) seems to suggest that these opponents represented a somewhat unified community with distinct rituals and a shared and common identity (centered around the NLD), Prasse-Freeman and Kabya (2021) argue that political opposition in Myanmar has always been and remains to be fluid and fragmented. As such, the military targeted in its politicide not a united community, but it fought and continues to do so against a multitude of oppositional fronts who have their own goals and interests in defying the military. As such, the COVID-19 pandemic represented itself as a convenient weapon for the military to target its different opponents collectively, and without distinction.

ENSUING SOLIDARITY

Yet, despite the military's attempts of instrumentalizing the COVID-19 pandemic to immobilize the people and push its political ambitions of consolidating power, the military's opponents sought out solutions to fight back and provide healthcare services to the country's peoples outside the infrastructures and resources of the state. Deeply distrusting the military government, ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) had already established their own prevention campaigns to the COVID-19 pandemic before the coup (Passeri, 2022). This was only possible as EAOs and local NGOs had created a coalition in developing a parallel healthcare system that provisioned ethnic minorities, especially in the Southeast of Myanmar. Over the years, the development of this alternative healthcare system also received support from international donors,

and since 2011 and 2012 cooperation between governmental and EAOs healthcare systems ensued after the signing of ceasefire treaties (Davis & Jolliffe, 2016).

After the coup, the newly formed *National Unity Government* (NUG)[3] could build on these earlier efforts to initiate a COVID-19 taskforce in coordination with health organizations administered by ethnic minorities and their EAOs. With their joint effort, they hoped to vaccinate those people who so far rejected vaccination out of rebellion and mistrust towards the military-administered vaccination programs. The military supposedly conducted a secret vaccination program for its own personnel with Covaxin – a COVID-19 vaccine produced in and imported from India, which was yet to undergo clinical trials and approval for safe use. After the initial doses were given to military personnel, Covaxin was also administered to civilians in April 2021, according to an official of the Food and Drug Administration ("COVID-19 vaccine was tested", 2021). Hence, rather than providing only vaccines that had undergone all required tests and trials, the military seemed to have adopted the stance to make use of any vaccine available to them. In contrast, the NLD had acquired and used the approved Covishield vaccine in its vaccination program before its suspension ("COVID-19 vaccine was tested", 2021). Further, the NUG and ethnic minorities had acquired six million doses of vaccines, which were to be administered by EAOs and by UN agencies (Krishna & Howard, 2021).

Overall, the CDM operated on grassroots activism and underground communication structures, such as building neighbourhood watches and alarm systems and selecting their own representatives while ousting those aligned with the military (Jordt et al., 2023). This kind of grassroots activism and its structures were first established in 1988 when student protesters had to flee to ethnic minority areas for protection (Brooten, 2021). In 2021 protesters and civil servants participating in the CDM once again fled to ethnic minority areas to seek protection from the military (David et al., 2022). While previously dormant and somewhat forgotten, with a re-emergence of violence against Burmese people, centre-periphery relations and connections were remembered and revived. They were now utilized to build a more unified resistance against the military, laying the groundwork for a possible solidarity across ethnic and class differences (Loong, 2023; Prasse-Freeman & Kabya, 2021).

This cross-ethnic, and to some extent cross-class, solidarity appeared as a new phenomenon in Myanmar. Not only was it a joint effort in combating the COVID-19 pandemic and the coup, but the protest movement as such appeared to have changed significantly – in distinction to the 1988 student protests and the 2007 Saffron Revolution[4]. As Jordt et al. (2023, p. 21) write, in the protests against the latest coup "[m]ore robust democratic political demands gathered broad support for abolishing the 2008 constitution and establishing a federal democratic polity", drawing less on

3 The NUG formed in opposition to the military coup on 16 April 2021 and claims legitimacy as the Burmese peoples' government. Its members include many National League for Democracy (NLD) politicians, but it also includes representatives from ethnic nationalities (Moe Thuzar & Htet Myet Min Tun, 2022).

4 The Saffron Revolution of 2007 was a series of protests against a sharp rise in the rice and oil price induced by the military. The protests are called the 'saffron revolution' because members of the *sangha* (Buddhist clergy/community) joined the protests and decided to excommunicate the military after the military's violent retaliation against its members (Jordt et al., 2023).

Bamar Buddhist majority ideals and concepts but rather on global ideas of democracy and solidarity. Prasse-Freeman and Kabya (2021) also emphasize that demands for democracy are not limited to the reinstalment of the NLD government that had won the November 2020 elections, but include a reassessment of the past (Prasse-Freeman & Kabya, 2021, p. 2). It partially addresses the exclusions, inequalities, and injustices perpetrated, also in times of Myanmar's so-called democratic transition. Rather than continuing a politics of centralization for the unionization of Myanmar, discussions about a federal future of Myanmar gained another momentum, in which ethnic armed groups appeared as a necessary force against the military and the foundation of a future federal army (David et al., 2022). The discussions also laid the groundwork for a potential bridging of cleavages between the former National League for Democracy, whose members now form a significant part of the new National Unity Government (NUG), and ethnic minorities and their EAOs (South, 2021).

However, while the opposition in the centre and the peripheries have the joint goal of superseding the State Administration Council (SAC) junta and have expressed intentions to solidarize, cleavages among the protesters and minorities over a future common government and administration of state persist. For example, despite a joint response to COVID-19 with EAOs and EAOs proving to possess quite some support from ethnic populations, these EAOs have not been sufficiently recognized as actors in a future government, whereas the NUG claims legitimate authority for leading the country (South, 2021). As Loong (2023) argues, this also explains the long silence of some ethnic minorities and their armed organizations at the beginning of the protests. The problem is that lasting centre-periphery (majority-minority) tensions may slow advances in consolidating solidarity and finding common solutions to fight the junta and establish a new government and possible political system. The relations between Bamar civilians and ethnic minorities will decide if their protest and fight against the coup will be successful and long-lasting (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung & Khun Noah, 2021; Loong, 2023).

Nevertheless, the aftermath of the coup forced some NLD members and protesters to rethink their attitude and statements towards ethnic minorities and their interests, most notably to the Rohingya. Suddenly, protesters and politicians issued apology statements for having looked the other way or supported the violent actions taken against the Rohingya in the past (Jordt et al., 2023; Prasse-Freeman & Kabya, 2021). Such apologies are a significant step, according to Debbie Stothard (2022), and may symbolize a paradigm shift in the treatment of the Rohingya in Myanmar. While the Rohingya's persecution was previously justified and legitimated as 'anti-terrorist' operations and an internal affair by the military, the NLD government, and large parts of the public, the violence of the military towards the coup protesters (of often Bamar ethnicity) has shifted their perspective. Acknowledging the past and current violence committed against the Rohingya through their apology statements, anti-coup protesters and members of the civilian government demonstrate that they are in dialogue with an international audience that has raised serious human rights abuses and genocide against the Rohingya during Myanmar's so-called democratic transition. Before the coup, this kind of concession would not have been possible. However, with the coup and the protests' violent suppression, some members of the former government and Bamar people suddenly learnt to understand the military's violence as overboard

and illegitimate, and no longer subject solely to internal political affairs. In contrast, it required international attention and intervention (David et al., 2022; Simpson, 2021).

Further expressions of solidarity with Rohingya were linked to creating the hashtag #Black4Rohingya used on social media and donning black clothes in solidarity with them, organising a women's march, and staging a silent protest on Rohingya Genocide Remembrance Day in 2021 (Khin Ohmar, 2021b; Simpson, 2021). However, it is yet to be assessed how far the newfound empathy and solidarity for the Rohingya is lasting and where it is leading (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung & Khun Noah 2021). Although the NUG has started to cooperate with the International Court of Justice on the Rohingya issue and finally acknowledges the atrocities committed against them (Moe Thuzar & Htet Myet Min Tun, 2022), apologies towards the Rohingya and solidarity actions with them are mostly led and issued by the younger generation of Burmese peoples, whereas, the older generation largely remains silent (Khin Ohmar, 2021b). Further, many Burmese people still venerate Aung San Suu Kyi, who the Rohingya no longer can trust after her civilian government not only let their persecution happen but even defended it. As such, Aung San Suu Kyi's role after the coup as a leading politician might be essential in forwarding or holding back reconciliation with the Rohingya people. So far, despite emerging actions in solidarity with the Rohingya, the situation for Rohingya has not improved. From January 2020 to June 2021, 3,046 Rohingya tried to cross the Andaman Sea in search of better protection and died on their perilous journeys (UNHCR, 2021). Yet, neighbouring nation-states felt entitled to refuse newly arriving Rohingya and other refugees and migrants amidst fears of a spread of the COVID-19 virus (Fumagalli, 2022; Khanna, 2020). Rohingya have been turned away and left drifting at sea or outsourced to Bhasan Char – an island designated by the Bangladesh government to contain Rohingya refugees (Grundy-Warr & Lin, 2020; Khanna, 2020). Hence, if the military remains in power, the situation for the Rohingya is unlikely to improve and will prevent Rohingya abroad from returning to Myanmar (Khin Ohmar, 2021c).

But Rohingya have not been the only ones fleeing their homes and camps during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other ethnic minorities and Bamar protesters and political opponents also crossed borders, especially into India and Thailand, to seek refuge amidst continued and revived conflict in ethnic minority areas (Fumagalli, 2022; Loong, 2023). Many people live on the run, trying to escape the military's grip. On their flight to marginalized and rural areas or overcrowded refugee camps, they are exposed to a higher risk of infection with COVID-19 as they live with a notable lack of access to hygiene and public healthcare (Banik et al., 2020; Kobayashi et al., 2021). Yet, seeking refuge in ethnic minority areas has been noted by Brooten (2021), as well as Loong (2023), as an important phase and factor to the formation of solidarity on which to establish political transition and reconciliation between the different parties. While in the past, the military was to some extent able to claim working for the protection of the union of Myanmar in fighting ethnic minority armies, this claim becomes questionable if Bamar civilian protesters indeed find refuge in ethnic minority areas under the protection of their armed groups (Loong, 2023). Thus, in the wake of COVID-19 and the coup, it is flight that might solve divergences between the Bamar and ethnic minorities in the long term. Flight from the centre to the borderlands might appear as a necessary tool to not only free the borderlands' ethnic minorities

from their long-lasting political isolation since the establishment of a military government and throughout Myanmar's acclaimed transition towards democracy, but it might also become the centre from which to fight the military's attempts of permanently disempowering and politically isolating the country's population.

CONCLUSION

While the world was caught in conflict over solving the COVID-19 issue by exercising social distancing, isolation, and immobility, the Burmese peoples were unable to adhere to some of these measures due to the falling together of the 3Cs – conflict, COVID-19, and coup. In a situation in which the military government weaponised the COVID-19 pandemic to re-establish its power monopoly, the Burmese peoples had no choice but to disobey specific protective health measures in defiance of the military's illegitimate grab on power. Adhering to all popular COVID-19 measures would have meant for the peoples to submit into an ensuing long-term political disempowerment of the people. In effect, Burmese peoples did not have a choice but to disregard some COVID-19 measures temporarily to protect their rights and mobilize in solidarity against a repressive military regime that made access to healthcare increasingly inefficient and unequal to control its peoples and eliminate its political opponents.

Yet, the Burmese population did not disregard the COVID-19 pandemic as a major health crisis. In contrast, in their protests, they criticised the military not only for the coup but also for the mismanagement of the COVID-19 crisis, and its instrumentalization to grab onto power rather than granting safe and equal access to healthcare services for all (such as proper vaccination). The civil disobedience movement served to protect the Burmese peoples, and not to harm them. Contrary to the military's claim, striking health care workers did not commit genocide on the people, but it was the military who tried to instrumentalize COVID-19 and public health resources to punish political opponents and force people into line with the military government, taking peoples' unnecessary death into consideration. Healthcare workers, however, did not stop providing help despite dropping out of government facilities and protesting on the streets. Instead, they shifted their attention to private and township hospitals to lead a two-front war: against the military and against the spread of the virus. Their protest and noncompliance were not in denial of COVID-19, but in respect and consideration of it. They risked their lives in facing the military and the coronavirus by doing their job despite an ongoing political crisis that was claiming their lives.

To conclude, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Myanmar remained a country on the move – politically, socially, and physically. The Burmese peoples marched on the streets as much as they moved their protests online to distribute the news of the coup, its protest, and repression, as far and wide as possible. They also moved ideologically towards solidarity with ostracized and marginalized communities and renewed discussions on a federal future of Myanmar. As such, in Myanmar, the triple crisis seems to have softened the antagonism between the Bamar people and ethnic minorities. Although ethnic minorities and EAOs appear to have reacted belatedly to the coup, they slowly began to forge ties of solidarity in fighting not only the COVID-19 pandemic but also the military's coup, providing refuge to those fleeing the military. In times of global immobility, the peoples of Myanmar moved more than

ever. At the time of writing, their movements in protest against an illegitimate and irresponsible military government have not dissipated.

However, the military's attempt of consolidating its coup is still lasting, leading the country and its people continuously back into a state of political isolation and disempowerment. While the Burmese peoples do not despair, their peaceful protests are increasingly accompanied by armed conflict led by EAOs but also newly formed People's Defence Forces (PDFs) of young Burmese to defend their and their family's lives (Khin Ohmar, 2021b; Moe Thuzar & Htet Myet Min Tun, 2022). Remembering Ma Kyal Sin lying on the floor to protect herself from the bullets of the military and wearing a t-shirt with the slogan "Everything will be OK" on the day she was shot, it can only be hoped that in the end, her wish will be fulfilled.

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DISCLOSURE

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The Effects of COVID-19 on Refugees in Peninsular Malaysia: Surveillance, Securitization, and Eviction

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This paper focuses on the largest group of refugees in Malaysia, the Rohingya. Many Rohingya have made Malaysia their home, even though they have no legal status in the country. When COVID-19 was detected in Malaysia, the government followed a strategy of suppression, with targeted lockdowns in areas of COVID-19 outbreaks. As most refugees work to survive, they hold important front-line jobs and were exposed to COVID-19 at higher rates of infection than Malaysians. In this paper, we trace the way the Malaysian government, Malaysian people, and refugees encountered COVID-19, and how refugees became the subject of enhanced securitization and surveillance based on prejudice. We show how the state enacted securitization first at the borders, before it inverted this process and focused on domestic border work wherein neighborhoods, mosques and markets became central places of immigration control and exclusion for refugees. Based on data collected during ethnographic fieldwork in peninsular Malaysia between 2020 and 2021, we argue that the securitization of refugees, their surveillance and even expulsion and eviction demonstrates continued and heightened scapegoating of refugees for all of Malaysia's ills. These actions reinforced the stigma and stereotype of refugees being legally undocumented and therefore outside of and too often unwelcome in the Malaysian body politic.

Keywords: COVID-19; Malaysia; Refugees; Rohingya; Securitization; Surveillance

PROLOGUE

It is another humid day on the outskirts of Malaysia's largest city Kuala Lumpur. The Malaysian government has closed most businesses due to the outbreak of COVID-19 clusters across the country. Most roads are deserted due to strict lockdowns, but the wholesale fruit and vegetable market here is still open for business. Inside the market compound, workers wear color-coded shirts to indicate what they sell: Green for vegetables, red for fruit, and blue for fish. Traders are rushing around to purchase food for their restaurants and shops, many of

which remain open for takeaway and delivery orders. One thing missing here today is the usually large contingent of migrant and refugee workers, predominantly Rohingya and Myanmar Muslims. Mohamad, a Rohingya refugee who usually works there, looks over to the market from his apartment. He cannot work and therefore will not earn any money, because local authorities put up restrictions on foreigners working at the market. Ostensibly, such restrictions are implemented for health and safety as well as national security reasons, but Mohamad guesses that it is prejudice against refugees, and Rohingya in particular, that is driving these restrictions, which now means he and his family will go hungry.

INTRODUCTION: REFUGEES AND COVID-19

Malaysia is a non-signatory country to the United Nations Refugee Convention, which means refugees have no formal status or rights in the country. By 2022, around 185,000 refugees, the vast majority of which are Rohingya from Myanmar, have been registered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) with many thousands more living in Malaysia unregistered (UNHCR, 2022). In the absence of a domestic refugee policy, the UNHCR is the only agency that conducts the refugee status determination process and issues identity cards as well as manages the eventual return or resettlement to safe third countries. There is also a tacit acknowledgement of this substantial refugee presence by the Malaysian government through the National Security Council Directive No. 23, which classifies them as *Pendatang Asing Tanpa Izin* (PATI), or foreigners without permission. This directive, which was signed in 2009, outlines freedom of movement for refugees within peninsular Malaysia and permits self-employment for self-sustenance. However, the immigration and police authorities often do not respect this directive; this was especially the case during the COVID-19 lockdowns, as we explore in detail in this paper.

Refugees in Malaysia must be self-sufficient as they do not receive support from the state or the UNHCR. Thus, they must work to sustain themselves and their communities. Refugees are widely tolerated as workers and form an integral part of Malaysia's shadow economy that covers much of the hospitality industry, general services, construction, and agriculture, but they are treated as undocumented migrants by the law (Muniandy, 2020). They can become subject to extortion, rent-seeking, and other discrimination as their lack of legal status usually means they have no recourse through the courts or via the police if they are maltreated or become victims of crime.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these vulnerabilities and the general precarity of refugees (Missbach & Stange, 2021; Nungsari et al., 2020). When COVID-19 was detected in Malaysia, the government followed a strategy of suppression with targeted lockdowns in areas of COVID-19 outbreaks internally (Tang, 2022), whilst closing its borders externally. The first Malaysian Movement Control Order was imposed on 18 March 2020 under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 and the Police Act 1967 (NST, 2020). This restrictive order included a national ban on sporting, cultural and religious mass gatherings. From 11 January until 1 August 2021, a state of emergency was declared by the King on the advice of Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin. According to the Prime Minister, one of the justifications for suspending the parliament was to provide power to the military,

in addition to immigration and the police, in securing the national borders against undocumented foreigners, including refugees (Yassin, 2020). This reinforced the stigmatization and public view that refugees posed a national threat.

Many refugees hold important front-line jobs in wholesale markets, construction, restaurants, and garbage collection, for example. As a result, they were exposed to COVID-19 and infected at higher rates. The government closed entire neighborhoods frequented by migrant workers and refugees, in some cases physically separating them from the rest of the Malaysian body politic. Such securitization of an entire populace swept the country, with ordinances targeting refugees and migrant workers for expulsion and eviction. In this paper, we trace the way the Malaysian government, Malaysian people, and refugees encountered COVID-19 and how refugees, especially, became the subject of enhanced securitization and surveillance based on prejudice. This paper will demonstrate how the state enacted securitization first at the borders, the external edges of the nation-state, before it inverted this process and focused on domestic border work, wherein neighborhoods, mosques, and markets became central places of immigration control and exclusion for refugees, especially Rohingya. These actions reinforced the stigma and many stereotypes of refugees as outside the law and therefore unwelcome to the Malaysian body politic. This paper also seeks to interrogate the logic used by the state to operationalize these harsh policies towards migrants and refugees during the pandemic.

METHODS

For this paper, ethnographic fieldwork was carried out between 2020 and 2021 with a range of refugee groups, but with a focus on the Rohingya, who live in urban and semi-urban areas in peninsular Malaysia. This was part of one of the authors' PhD fieldwork, engaging with seventy interview participants consisting of refugees and various stakeholders such as state officials, policymakers, and activists. Data collection involved participant observation, interviews, and visits to workplaces, people's homes, and public places, mostly in the Klang Valley. Rohingya form the largest refugee group in Malaysia by far and therefore this paper focuses on their experiences. Many Rohingya speak Malay, which allowed for easy communication and data collection. Since the Rohingya community is patriarchal and both authors are men, the majority of the 31 Rohingya refugee respondents were men, with only 5 women interviewed. Besides participant observation and interviews, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns in Malaysia necessitated extensive online ethnography, including on social media and via messaging applications such as Facebook and Whatsapp in both Malay and English. These tools necessarily include some limitations around access, as using them privileges the views of those engaged in online social media and who possess mobiles with access to these sites. However, in our experience, most Rohingya have access to mobile phones and at least one messaging application or were able to be contacted via mobile phone to speak to them during lockdown periods. We were also able to gage the perspectives of local Malaysians about refugees through their postings and discussions on Facebook. Besides social media, we collected data from media reports the Malaysian authorities publicized, for example on their immigration operations. Refugees and activists also provided

information from the ground via online platforms. Consent was obtained from participants either verbally or in writing except for publicly available information online. Nevertheless, all sensitive data was anonymized in line with the 'do no harm' principle. This research follows The University of Queensland Human Research Ethics guidelines (Approval number: 2019002148).

ROHINGYA REFUGEES IN MALAYSIA

Rohingya are a stateless group of people hailing from Rakhine State, in Myanmar. Since the 1982 Burma Citizenship Law only recognized 135 ethnic groups as citizens, excluding Rohingya (Brett & Hlaing, 2020), they have subsequently been denied basic rights such as owning property, access to education and healthcare. It is estimated that there are 850,000 Rohingya living under apartheid-like conditions in Myanmar, 1.6 million live in Bangladesh and over 1.24 million in other countries such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India, and Malaysia (Alam, 2019). Rohingya have been coming to Malaysia since the 1970s (Kassim, 2015) and the 1980s (Letchamanan, 2013), mostly by boat via Thailand or directly to Malaysian waters. The communal violence against Rohingya since 2012 caused large-scale displacements and irregular movement culminating in the 2015 Andaman boat crisis (Amnesty International, 2015). In the first quarter of 2015, around 25,000 mostly Rohingya people left the Bay of Bengal and 8,000 of them were left stranded on boats (BBC, 2015) that created a 'human ping-pong' between Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia as no country was willing to take them in (Murdoch, 2015). As the persecution against Rohingya in Myanmar intensified and the future in refugee camps in Bangladesh is bleak, Rohingya are forced to keep taking the perilous boat journeys to Malaysia. This trend continued even when Malaysia reinforced its borders as part of the measures to contain COVID-19.

As of September 2022, 105,870 or 58% out of 183,430 UNHCR-registered asylum seekers and refugees in Malaysia are Rohingya. Activists on the ground estimate that the Rohingya population residing in Malaysia is almost double if unregistered ones are included. Many Rohingya see Malaysia as a destination country because of its affluent Muslim majority country status and the extensive existing Rohingya community networks. To date, there are up to four generations who live in stateless limbo as refugees in Malaysia (fieldwork interviews 2020). Although Rohingya often quickly assimilate into the dominant Malay society by speaking the Malay language and practicing Malay culture, they still face racism due to their physical attributes (Hoffstaedter, 2017b) and lack of education (Azis, 2014). In the absence of the right to work and denial of access to education in Malaysia, most Rohingya work informally as "temporary, unskilled, and low wage workers" in a range of sectors (Wahab, 2017, p. 102), including as market helpers, grass cutters, petty traders, recycling collectors, and construction workers. As informal workers with often daily wages paid in cash, they were badly affected during the COVID-19 lockdowns by the loss of jobs or reduced hours of work.

Many Malaysians see refugees as the Other (Hoffstaedter, 2017a) or even dangerous Other (Ansems de Vries, 2016). As Malaysia continues to grapple with its domestic ethnic relations, refugees and migrants have become convenient scapegoats to deflect attention from often fraught domestic politics. Refugees have become the target for electoral gain when politicians and authorities may offer empathetic or threatening

rhetoric at the same time whilst enforcing immigration controls including deportations for political gain (Walden, 2022). COVID-19 has exacerbated this often xenophobic sentiment in Malaysia, which has become more harmful than the virus itself (Tan, 2020). The Malaysia Racial Discrimination Report 2021 revealed that out of 53 incidents investigated, 13% were attributed to xenophobia, with Rohingya singled out as primary targets (Pusat Komas, 2022). One example was a media report that stated local residents believed that Rohingya refugees were unhygienic, brought crime and drugs to the neighborhood, and posed unfair competition to the job markets.

SURVEILLANCE AND SECURITIZATION AT THE BORDER

Surveillance theories and concepts can be categorized into three phases. The first phase encompasses physical and spatial surveillance, typified by the panopticon. The second phase entails networked surveillance using digital technologies. The third phase combines the first two phases by monitoring physical and digital spaces, including corporate and governmental control as well as technologies of the self and self-surveillance (Galič et al., 2017). This paper focuses on how refugees are being surveilled physically and spatially since the Malaysian authorities (still) lack digital data on most refugee bodies. This crude method to surveil a populace during the COVID-19 pandemic led to most nation-state borders being shut. In the Malaysian case this happened most strikingly, when several Rohingya boats were pushed back in the name of public health. In this context it must be noted that the border and its bordering regimes "do not simply respond to existing nationalism or racism. Rather, they activate and mobilize them in the face of a nest of economic and political problems" (Brown, 2014, p. 93), which may be expanded to health emergencies such as the pandemic. Thus, the border and its concomitant discourses of the nation often respond to and interact with other discourses around perceived threats, such as foreigners.

In line with the strict border control measures imposed, the Malaysian authorities turned the refugee boats away, even though they were already in Malaysian waters. In April 2020, Malaysia turned away at least 596 Rohingya (Amnesty International, 2020) and 300 Rohingya in June 2020 (Yildiz, 2020). In the first five months of 2020, Malaysian authorities turned away 22 boats carrying Rohingya trying to seek refuge (BBC, 2020). It is unknown what exactly happened to all the boats after being pushed back to sea, because Thailand, Indonesia, and Bangladesh, like Malaysia, used public health measures to close their borders. Such measures proved to be fatal when UNHCR reported that 2020 became the "deadliest" year for sea journeys for Rohingya with 218 dying or having gone missing (UNHCR, 2021a).

To discourage additional boat arrivals, the National Task Force on strengthening Malaysia's borders circulated a poster depicting security forces with guns stating: "Ethnic Rohingya migrants, your arrival is not welcome" (Amnesty International, 2021). Those who managed to reach the Malaysian shore were charged with unlawful entry and detained (AFP, 2021), despite an earlier court decision overturning the punishment of Rohingya who arrived by boat, citing the international protection accorded to them (Azmi, 2020). However, some refugees continued to arrive in Malaysia via the land border with Thailand by paying people smugglers and traffickers. In interviews, refugees told us about the harrowing realities of their journeys. For example, Rahman is a

30-year-old Rohingya man who left for Malaysia alone in 2017. His wife was arrested by the authorities in Myanmar and therefore he had to take care of his two children, who had been living with their mother. His eight-year-old daughter and nine-year-old son undertook a boat journey from Myanmar to Thailand in 2021. They were kept hostage there by traffickers and finally released to enter Malaysia in December 2021 after Rahman paid them RM 30,000 (USD 6,700). To secure such an amount of money, he had to travel across the country in order to borrow from friends living across peninsular Malaysia. This cost him even more when he was dismissed from his job because he had missed too many days travelling and trying to source the ransom monies. This shows the compound effect of hardened borders that push displaced and vulnerable people to their limits.

SURVEILLANCE AND SECURITIZATION OF DOMESTIC SPACES – POLICING CLUSTERS

Refugees are subject to a range of surveillance techniques and infrastructures of control by the Malaysian state, the UNHCR and sometimes their own refugee community organizations (Hoffstaedter, 2019). Refugees in Malaysia are predominately urban refugees — there are no refugee camps in Malaysia — living with and amongst the Malaysian population mainly in urban centers of Penang, Johor, and the Klang valley, including Kuala Lumpur (Hoffstaedter, 2015). Whilst most refugees in Malaysia are there undocumented, the Malaysian government knows where they live and its immigration and police forces are keenly aware of the presence of refugees in these urban centers, with many local police offices and Special Branches being in direct contact with refugee representatives and refugee community organizations. However, unlike neighboring countries like Singapore, where migrant workers were confined to their workplaces, refugees in Malaysia are much more spread out and not easily confined to specific locations, except for those who have been detained in immigration detention.[1]

This became a national issue for Rohingya refugees because an early COVID cluster was detected as part of an Islamic missionary group Tablighi Jamaat mass gathering, which many Rohingya from across peninsular Malaysia had attended.[2] The gathering at Sri Petaling Mosque in Kuala Lumpur from 27 February until 1 March 2020 involved 16,000 attendees comprising Malaysians, visitors from 27 countries, as well as migrants and refugees residing in Malaysia, and quickly became the country's largest COVID-19 infection cluster (Malaysiakini, 2020). Because the gathering involved thousands of attendees travelling from many countries, it posed an extremely high risk; however, Rohingya were quickly singled out by the media and the authorities

1 Malaysia has 21 immigration detention centers throughout the country, which the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) has declared overcrowded and understaffed (Bernama, 2022c). Currently, there are 17,500 people including over 1,500 children at these facilities (Tan, 2022). The overcrowded and poor conditions caused at least three COVID-19 clusters (David & Lee, 2020).

2 The transnational Tabligh movement, which was founded in 1927 in India and reached Malaysia in the 1950s, aims to bring Muslims back to the core teachings of the Prophet Muhammad through short term preaching and outreach activities (Sharep, 2018). They often gather at a local mosque for at least three days and up to four months doing various Islamic activities including prayers, sermons, and preaching to the local community.

as most uncooperative. During contact tracing, the Malaysian authorities started to track down around 2,000 Rohingya attendees (Das & Ananthalakshmi, 2020), a figure disputed by the former President of the Rohingya Society in Malaysia, who believed it was only around 600 with the remainder being Myanmar Muslims and other groups (fieldwork interview, Ampang, 7 June 2020). Mercy Malaysia and other humanitarian organizations collaborated with the UNHCR and the Malaysian Ministry of Health to conduct screening for Rohingya attendees, who feared attending screenings because of the risk of getting arrested and not being able to provide for themselves and their families during the quarantine period (Bernama, 2020). The Tablighi cluster sparked false allegations that went viral on social media about refugees and migrants refusing to get tested for COVID-19 (AFP Malaysia, 2020).

These allegations further catalyzed xenophobia and reinforced prejudices against Rohingya and the refugee community in general, who were accused of not adhering to local rules. A recent survey found that almost 50% of Rohingya respondents reported that they experienced racism during the COVID-19 pandemic in the forms of abusive language and hate campaigns on social media (Mixed Migration Centre, 2020). The Tablighi cluster fomented in the Malaysian public a certain view of Rohingya and refugees more broadly as a danger. The material effects of such profiling and othering are best described by what happened next in terms of the government's response.

To combat the rise of COVID infections, the Malaysian authorities classified areas according to different color codes to indicate the number of cases. Red zones referred to areas with high numbers of cases and were put under Enhanced Movement Control Order (EMCO). People who lived in red zones could not leave their homes or compounds, with barricades and barbed wire going up around apartment blocks and even entire neighborhoods. These were patrolled by the Malaysian security forces, including the army. The color-coded classification was helpful to mitigate risks, but it also became a target when immigration raids were conducted in red zones (Sukumaran & Jaipragas, 2020). Residents were only informed through a press conference and circulated press statements on the government's social media accounts and websites. The patrolling authorities also made public announcements over loudspeaker in the affected areas, but only in Malay, which posed a significant language barrier for some refugees. In one case, several hours after the lockdown rules were lifted, hundreds of migrants and refugees, including children, were arrested by the authorities. These sorts of incursions, and one may argue overreach, by authorities created a climate of fear as they focused on immigration offences, but in effect undermined public health efforts to contain the virus infection, which did not discriminate based on someone's immigration status. Many sick individuals reconsidered coming forward to get tested because of their immigration status, even though they had UNHCR documents. The risk that sick, undocumented individuals in Malaysia face is not new because the pre-existing *Circular of the Director-General of Health No. 10/2001: Guidelines for Reporting Illegal Immigrants Obtaining Medical Services at Clinics and Hospitals* requires all healthcare workers per the Immigration Act 1959/1963 to report to immigration and police the presence of undocumented persons, including children, who seek treatment at public healthcare facilities (Nambiar, 2020). This Circular, issued in 2001, effectively restricts access to healthcare, in addition to the overpriced foreigner rates being charged at public clinics and hospitals for all non-citizens.

The presence of security personnel, barbed wires, and barricades in the neighborhoods where refugees live also aggravated some refugees' mental health conditions, such as post-traumatic stress disorder. During the lockdowns, the only mental health service provider to refugees, Health Equity Initiative, reported that their patients experienced heightened rates of anxiety and depression, mainly because of loss of employment, their inability to pay rent, their inability to get basic necessities such as food, their risk of arrest and detention and risk of deportation (Verghis et al., 2021). But effects on men and women were different, especially for very patriarchal societies such as the Rohingya. For many Rohingya women, the presence of the military and security forces on the streets triggered pre-existing trauma of being targeted for their Rohingya ethnicity and being women in Myanmar and Bangladeshi refugee camps. Fatimah, a Rohingya woman activist, recounted: "In Myanmar, Rohingya women have risks of arrest, kidnapping and rape. In Malaysia, Rohingya women are still terrified when they see the police. It reminds them of the situation in Myanmar" (fieldwork phone interview, 10 April 2021). Most married Rohingya women were housewives working at home during the lockdowns, so constant surveillance created a traumatic atmosphere for them. Furthermore, the loss of livelihoods for most — as men or household earners could not leave to go to work — lead to an increase in domestic violence, adding even more suffering to their already marginalized lives (fieldwork phone interview, 29 April 2020).

TARGETING ROHINGYA AS A SCAPEGOAT

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020, several other incidents contributed to an unprecedented backlash against the Rohingya community. The Tablighi cluster, another major COVID-19 cluster in Selayang, an area known to house many Rohingya (Karim, 2020), and the irregular boat arrivals in Malaysian waters created the perception among the Malaysian public that the refugee community in general, and Rohingya in particular, was not adhering to the COVID-19 measures and that this could jeopardize their public health (Badd, 2020).

During EMCO, everyone was expected to stay at home to contain the virus spread unless they had a permission letter from the authorities to leave home for work. Being informal and undocumented workers, refugees had no access to this exemption letter and therefore they could be arrested by the authorities or harassed by civilians for leaving their homes. A four-minute video clip went viral on social media detailing a Rohingya grasscutter getting harassed by Malaysians for not staying at home during the strict EMCO (FMT Reporters, 2020). He was also quizzed about his Islamic knowledge as a Muslim, probably as it was during the holy month of Ramadan. Many Rohingya considered this a direct attack on the Rohingya community, who have always seen Malaysia as a Muslim country with a strong Muslim brotherhood, and subsequently as a haven.

Senior Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob continued the effort to arrest and deport undocumented migrants per the Immigration Act via a police operation specifically targeting undocumented foreigners, and saw these actions in line with other countries' practices during the pandemic (The Star, 2020). However, refugees were most surveilled and targeted by the authorities because they (along with migrants

more generally) have for a long time been deemed a high risk and danger for the spread of communicable diseases (Kassim, 2017). Such fears and prejudices became material for social media, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, where netizens shared old videos, pictures, and their personal experiences of refugees and what they considered 'unacceptable' behavior and culture (Bala & Lumayag, 2021). Some photos of dirty areas and small garbage tips around a well-known Rohingya neighborhood were circulated to portray refugees as a public nuisance and a national burden. The backlash against Rohingya urged the refugee community to perform 'grateful politics' on social media to counter the xenophobic sentiment (Nursyazwani & Abd Jalil, 2023). Using Facebook, some Rohingya shared their stories of escaping genocide in Myanmar and being hosted by Malaysia with hashtags #GratefulRohingya #ThankYouMalaysia.

Figure 1. A Facebook public post screenshot states "Entering Selayang market area full of Rohingya is akin to entering a garbage area. Dirty and smelly... Is this ethnic group dirty? I can't imagine rearing a cow there". (screenshot by the authors).

Even national leaders got involved in these online discussions. The former Prime Minister Najib Razak was once a champion for the Rohingya cause; for example, by organizing a massive rally in Kuala Lumpur in 2017 against the Rohingya genocide. Faced by the public outcry against refugees, especially Rohingya who had become the face of refugees in Malaysia by then, he backtracked his support by stressing the burden that Malaysia already carried by hosting Rohingya. On 24 April 2020, Najib Razak

posted on his Facebook page to counter the criticisms by Amnesty International regarding the boat turn backs (Razak, 2020):

> Firstly, I am not a hypocrite. BN [Barisan Nasional] Government during my time has helped the Rohingya a lot (…) We did not hold a rally to tell all the Rohingya refugees to come to Malaysia. (…) Secondly, my [Facebook] post today wants to reprimand Rohingya ethnics in the country to respect Malaysian laws and be sensitive to the sentiment and concerns of the [Malaysian] people during the COVID crisis (…) Thirdly, we CANNOT allow the two boats to land in Malaysia because we do not want another tragedy to happen. If the news spread widely that the two ships landed successfully and were accepted by Malaysia, then it is not impossible that tens or hundreds more boats will try to escape to Malaysia.

The public anger reached its zenith in April 2020 when Zafar Ahmad, the president of Myanmar Ethnic Rohingya Human Rights Organization Malaysia (MERHROM)[3], was falsely accused on social media of demanding Malaysian citizenship be granted to Rohingya refugees. This sparked a backlash on social media by some Malaysians. According to one Special Branch officer of the Royal Malaysian Police we talked to informally, the harsh reaction was compounded by the financial, physical, and mental effects of the COVID-19 pandemic faced by some Malaysians (fieldwork interviews 2020). He believed that some netizens had too much "free time" staying at home during the lockdowns, which allowed them to target Rohingya on social media. On the platform change.org alone, our records show that there were 27 petitions launched in April 2020 with 454,742 signatures gathered in total urging the government to take stern actions against Rohingya and even asking for the deportation of Rohingya from Malaysia. In contrast, there was only one petition, '#HormatNyawa: Save Lives at Sea' with just over 28,000 signatures calling for the Malaysian Government to rescue Rohingya boats at sea and allow their disembarkation according to the COVID-19 health protocols (Refugee Action for Change, 2020). Despite formal complaints by concerned advocate groups and individuals being made against the petitions and all petitions being taken down, this unprecedented public backlash prompted the government to issue an official statement re-asserting its stance not to recognize refugee status or any refugee-based organizations in Malaysia (Zainudin, 2020).

So far, we have discussed how the Malaysian public seized on refugees as potential threats and spreaders of disease during the pandemic and how Malaysian authorities responded to a perceived threat by closing entire neighborhoods. What started out as surveillance and measures of containment quickly turned to a full-scale securitization of refugees, migrants and foreigners living in prescribed areas of concerns to the authorities. We use securitization following the Copenhagen school (Buzan et al., 1998) and Biao Xiang's recent framing as the "state-led intervention in individual mobility to minimize perceived public threats" whilst maintaining "the established social order" (Xiang, 2022). The aim of such securitization is to enable the continued mobility for goods, capital, and people the state wants or needs to move, whilst containing and securitizing those it does not want to move. Thus, the Malaysian state used its powers to

3 MERHROM was founded by Zafar Ahmad in 1998. The organization is made up of only himself and although he has been a vocal activist for some time, he does not enjoy much support from the Rohingya community (fieldwork interviews 2021).

limit the mobility of people it knows it can treat in the harshest of ways without repercussions. Indeed, such a myopic securitization of a particular populace demonstrated the government's aim to politicize the presence of refugees and migrants in Malaysia.

MOSQUES

Malaysia's perception as a modern Muslim nation has attracted Rohingya to come and rebuild their lives there for a long time. Within peninsular Malaysia, Rohingya have much more freedom of movement compared to being confined to refugee camps in Bangladesh or their villages or Internally Displaced Camps in Myanmar. Nursyazwani (2020) argues that Rohingya in Malaysia should be termed "mobile refugees" to describe their relative mobility and imaginary citizenship their UNHCR card provides them. In Myanmar, Rohingya are deprived of their basic human rights, including the right to practice their religion – mosques are being targeted by the authorities and local mobs. Malaysia represents a haven for many in the community as they can embrace an outward Islamic lifestyle. In many places, Rohingya are welcome to attend local mosques together with Malaysians or set up their own prayer spaces.

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted this when non-citizens were restricted from attending religious spaces. The prohibition of foreigners to enter mosques and *surau*[4] varied from state to state since religious affairs are under the purview of each state or the federal territory. Notifications were posted outside suraus and mosques that sometimes directly addressed Rohingya. In front of Surau Kampung Plentong Baru in Johor, for example, a banner stated: "We are not welcoming Rohingya…

Figure 2. "Sign outside a mosque declaring Rohingya are not welcome, Johor, 2021." (photo by the authors).

4 A prayer space smaller than a mosque that usually does not conduct Friday prayers.

We do not need you here". The ban was imposed in different phases beginning in 2020. In the federal territories of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, and Labuan (an island in East Malaysia) a guideline on 18 March 2021 still prohibited the entrance of foreigners (Kumar, 2021), which was only lifted in November 2021 (Ahmad, 2021), much later than in other states. Two muftis from two states justified the policy as a public health measure and one of them even recommended the government relocate refugees who posed economic and socio-cultural threats to designated areas to limit their interaction with locals (Thomas & Nambiar, 2020). In a press statement, the Religious Affairs Minister apologized for the ban, citing that it was necessary under the standard operation procedures, but emphasized that the rude behavior towards non-citizens was inexcusable (al-Bakri, 2020).

Others were more accommodating throughout the ban. After the ban was imposed, some mosques continued to allow foreigners to enter and join the prayers. For example, a mosque in Klang allowed the Rohingya community to join Adilfitri[5] prayers in 2020, commemorating the end of Ramadan together. Refugees, who are mostly concentrated in urban areas such as Kuala Lumpur, felt this discrimination most once the ban had been lifted as they continued to be surveilled by locals as a potential danger.[6] Indeed their very presence in urban localities became a politicized issue when the Home Affairs Minister on his official Facebook page declared eleven locations throughout peninsular Malaysia 'foreigner hotspots' (Zainudin, 2021). He thanked netizens for the collective effort to provide information about the presence of foreigners in those locations and assured the public that the authorities would monitor them closely to ensure public safety.

This shows how an exclusionary policy can normalize discriminatory behavior within a society even after it has been abolished. A recent IOM survey (n=420) of refugees in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic reported that 43% of refugees were stopped by the authorities for documentation checks with some being extorted and arrested (IOM, 2021). Some refugees were unable to renew their UNHCR documents due to the lockdowns and containment strategies that locked down their neighborhoods. Therefore, UNHCR issued and updated letters on its website to be presented to the Malaysian authorities explaining this situation (UNHCR, 2021b). However, this was not respected by the authorities who continued to arrest refugees with expired cards or those without UNHCR cards (fieldwork interviews 2021). The arrested refugees and asylum seekers could be deported or detained in immigration detention centers indefinitely, because since August 2018 UNHCR has had no access to them to assess asylum claims. Such exclusionary politics were further played out in places where many refugees work, for example wet markets across the country.

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5 Aidilfitri is a religious celebration that marks the end of Ramadan, the holiest month in the Islamic calendar.

6 Such citizen surveillance has been used globally and was instrumental in the post 9/11 global war on terror where citizen-detectives surveilled 'others' (Vaughan-Williams, 2008) and new legal and political arrangements expanded border and immigration controls (Walsh, 2014). Malaysia has a long history of such vigilante immigration control because they deploy the large People's Volunteer Corps Malaysia (Ikatan Relawan Rakyat Malaysia) regularly for raids, to run immigration detention centers and, since 2020, to help enforce the EMCO, even though many human rights abuses have been documented (see e.g. Chin, 2008).

MARKETS AS KEY SITES OF RACIALIZED EXCLUSION

Selayang is an urban area that straddles both the federal territory of Kuala Lumpur and the state of Selangor in peninsular Malaysia. The area has become an ethnic enclave for refugees and migrants who mostly work in two wholesale markets, namely Selayang daily market and Kuala Lumpur wholesale market. The proximity of the two markets made Selayang a migrant and refugee enclave that attracted the public attention. A prominent COVID-19 cluster at KL Wholesale Market was linked to the Tablighi cluster (Palansamy, 2020b) and consequently was put under EMCO. A few weeks after EMCO was declared in the area, the authorities arrested 1,368 undocumented migrants, including 261 women and 98 children (Dzulkifly, 2020).

As most refugees live in cramped apartments, physical distancing was extremely difficult or simply impossible. The high infection rates caught the attention of the public and authorities, blaming the significant presence of refugee and migrant communities in Selayang for the outbreak. The public backlash prompted the authorities to act by enforcing the relevant laws to evict foreigners from the market compound. Foreigners like Mohamad from the prologue were no longer allowed to enter or work on the market compound, because local Malaysian workers should be prioritized for market jobs as imposed by the KL City Council (DBKL). This has only recently been strictly enforced at KL Wholesale Market. After all foreigners were expelled from working in the market complex, employers had a hard time recruiting local workers to replace them. This disrupted most business operations, because for the past 20 years foreigners have been the backbone of the market, working under precarious working conditions and for low wages, often below the Malaysian minimum wage (Muniandy, 2020).

Therefore, finding locals to replace foreigners was complicated, especially as the work is hard and the wages low. In addition, local workers demand access to workers' rights that are usually denied to refugee workers. Consequently, the traders were struggling to operate at full capacity due to their heavy dependence on refugee and migrant laborers (Soo, 2020). Besides banning non-citizens from entering the market, the enforcement agencies gave stern warnings or revoked the trading licenses of those business operators who still hired foreigners. The Malaysian public, meanwhile, chimed in alongside the authorities voicing concerns that the foreign traders were 'dirty' and offered cheaper prices that jeopardized the local traders (Bernama, 2022d).

Despite the efforts by the authorities, during a visit in October 2021 we found that refugees and migrants were only evicted from the KL Wholesale Market compound, not the Selayang daily market or surrounding shops and businesses. Outside of the fenced compound there were many Rohingya and Myanmar Muslim refugees working as porters at the shop lots. We also interviewed Zubair, a Rohingya man in his 50s who had been working as a sweeper in the market compound for the past eight years. The sub-contracting practice for the cleaning services opened a loophole for Zubair to still be employed even though he had been banned officially. Nevertheless, DBKL claimed that in 2020 they managed to evict more than 1,500 non-Malaysian traders and workers in line with the Wholesale Market By-Laws (Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur) 2002 (Bernama, 2022a).

In Meru, Klang, a 30-minute drive west of Kuala Lumpur, there is a wet market complex in which the Rohingya community has formed their own enclave, working and living in the shophouse units. Many live in shophouses that are around 100 meters away from the main sections of the market. In Klang, there was also a ruling that prohibited undocumented workers to be employed in the market complex. We met a representative of the Klang Stall Holders' Association, who showed us a copy of the association chairman's letter dated 15 December 2020 sent to the Klang Municipal Council that detailed the issues market employers had trying to find local employees and why they relied on foreign labor. The letter emphasized their effort to find local workers by following the procedures stipulated by the government. The efforts included advertising vacancies on an online job portal for a minimum of one month. The Klang local council (MPK) finally allowed the stall holders to hire refugees until April 2021 because they admitted that it was difficult for the traders to hire local workers. After the deadline passed, many Rohingya refugees continued to work there as usual because they had become indispensable for the market operations. Thus, since most market workers are Rohingya refugees, enforcing immigration rules strictly is not an option because it would disrupt the market operations for both the traders and customers. This was an instance where economic considerations outweighed enforcement and securitization concerns. It was simply too costly to evict the Rohingya workers completely as they provide cheap labor that is much needed in the post-COVID-19 economic recovery phase.

SECURITIZATION AND EXCLUSION

In the peri-urban and urban spaces we have detailed refugees and the urban poor share similar struggles and denials of their rights, such as the vulnerability to eviction, be it from their workplace, home, or informal settlements (Sanyal, 2012). Exclusion policies as we have described have only exacerbated refugees' vulnerabilities, including worsening their socioeconomic situation and living conditions (Kikano et al., 2021). The public perception in Malaysia is often that refugees are given daily allowances and accommodation, when in fact they must sustain themselves. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Tzu-Chi Foundation was one of the few non-governmental organizations willing and able to support refugees deprived of income during lockdowns and evictions from workplaces. They provided one-off cash assistance between RM 180 and RM 600 to refugee families based on their vulnerability and family size. The amount was still far from enough as the loss of income meant that refugees were struggling to pay their rent and food. At that time, a local NGO reported that 95% of 100 Rohingya interviewed did not get their salary for the month (Verghis et al., 2021). In a survey involving 400 respondents conducted by the Refugee Coalition of Malaysia, over 95% reported that they had lost their jobs. Ninety percent of them lived in rented accommodation with 60% paying between RM 500 (USD 100) to RM 1,000 (USD 200) monthly rent. Seventy five percent of them were only able to pay rent until April 2020 and 40% of them were threatened with eviction. On 10 June 2020, the Immigration Department of Malaysia sent letters to landlords in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor to warn them against renting their properties to undocumented foreigners, including refugees. The letter cited the specific

punishments outlined under the Immigration Act 1959/63, including a fine of up to RM 30,000 (USD 6,700) and potential imprisonment of maximum 12 years, or both, for each undocumented foreigner housed. Besides mailed letters, they also put-up banners to warn landlords or landowners not to rent out their properties to undocumented persons. This resulted in housing evictions for some refugees because their landlords were worried about the legal repercussions they might face. This aggravated the precarity for refugees who were unable to pay their monthly rent due to the loss of income during lockdowns. The media reported that over 100 UNHCR cardholder tenants faced eviction from their homes due to this ruling (Razak, 2020).

Responding to this matter, the Federal Territories Minister expressed his shock and then clarified that UNHCR cardholders were exempted from this ruling after much pressure from refugee rights activists (Palansamy, 2020a). Despite this verbal clarification, there was still some confusion on the ground because of the issuance of a reminder letter to landlords by the Immigration Department earlier. During our fieldwork, community members seeking assistance raised the issue of a family being asked to vacate their apartment with us. We suggested they show a news article to the landlord to defy the eviction. As a result, the property agent allowed them to remain. This eviction issue stems from the non-recognition of refugees who are lumped together into a catch-all category of 'undocumented migrant/foreigner' under the national laws and regulations.

These evictions were the beginning of a process of removing people the Malaysian government sees as hazardous in terms of the health of the nation. This, in effect, spelt out the way refugees and other undocumented migrants in Malaysia are seen by the state: as 'matter out of place' that simultaneously creates boundaries and presents a purified version of the Malaysian body politic (cf. Douglas, 2005). Subsequently, on 23 February 2021, the Malaysian Government deported around 1,200 individuals to

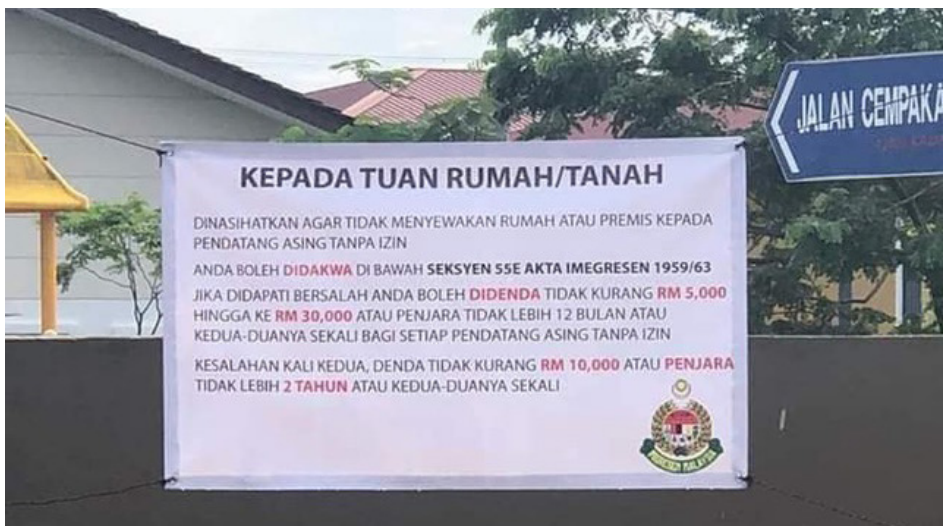

Figure 3. Viral photo circulating on Facebook that shows a banner reminding house owners and landlords not to rent out their premises to PATI or face punishments with a logo of the Immigration Department.

Myanmar. Nearly 100 of them were asylum-seekers (Reuters, 2021). The deportation included three people registered with UNHCR and 17 children who had at least one parent in Malaysia, in clear defiance of a court order to halt the deportation amidst the military coup in Myanmar (Ananthalakshmi & Latiff, 2021). The court ruling had little effect to stop more deportations. From April until October 2022, Malaysia deported over 2,000 Myanmar nationals, including military defectors who had not been assessed by the UNHCR yet (HRW, 2022). Such refoulment actions are against international laws and norms and reveal Malaysia's ongoing contradictions in how it deals with refugees on the often invoked 'humanitarian grounds' or 'humanitarian exception' (Abd Jalil, 2021; Lego, 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

This paper demonstrates that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities of refugees, especially regarding their migratory status, loss of livelihoods and the general public's negative perception of them. It also highlights the logic used by the state to operationalize its harsh policies towards non-citizens, particularly migrants and refugees, in the name of public health. Deploying a range of surveillance, securitization, eviction and deportation measures, the Malaysian government has weaponized undocumented foreigners, including refugees. Rohingya refugees became the focus of xenophobic sentiment during the pandemic for several reasons: Firstly, Rohingya were accused of not following the lockdown rules. Secondly, a fabricated message of a Rohingya activist demanding Malaysian citizenship went viral. Thirdly, the arrival of some boats carrying Rohingya refugees in Malaysian waters during the lockdowns was seen as a threat to public health and national sovereignty. As a result, refugees, and migrant workers more broadly, and Rohingya in particular, have been othered into categories that the public should be aware of, afraid of, and inform on. The Malaysian state, alongside vigilante citizens, engaged in domestic borderwork, where neighborhoods, mosques, and markets became central places of immigration control and exclusion for refugees. In this paper, we showed how heightened and even frenzied securitization exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and further marginalized refugees in Malaysia. We have argued that this securitization of refugees and migrant workers, their surveillance, and even expulsion and eviction demonstrate continued and heightened scapegoating of refugees and migrants for all Malaysia's ills. These actions reinforced the stigma and stereotype of refugees being legally undocumented and therefore outside of and unwelcome in the Malaysian body politic.

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DISCLOSURE

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Living With Pervasive Hazards: Place-Based Approach for Identifying Vulnerability and Coping Strategies in an Island Community in Cebu, Philippines

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Studies about disasters have focused on large-scale and extreme weather events. However, slow-onset hazards such as drought-like seasons and monsoons also pose challenges since they are dynamic and experienced differently from place to place. This paper shows how difficulties in livelihood of the agricultural sector can be made evident using a place-based approach for identifying vulnerability in an island setting. A household survey was conducted to gather perceptions of hazard impacts and coping strategies for extreme weather events and pervasive hazards. Results show that the perceived impacts of hazards differ by events, and respondents cope with extreme weather events and pervasive hazards in almost the same ways. The coping strategies include diversification of livelihood and mutual help, a common tradition among Philippine villages. Community-based disaster risk management strategies through indigenous ways also enabled the island community to bridge the interventions of the national government to the local context in terms of reducing risks. In conclusion, a place-based approach adds value to the current way of assessing vulnerability as it shows that social vulnerability is more dynamic in the local context, and social bonding is crucial for coping during difficult times.

Keywords: Community-Based Disaster Risk Management; Coping Strategies; Island; Philippines; Vulnerability

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INTRODUCTION

Studies about disasters have focused on large-scale and extreme weather events such as those that have measurable and distinct, observable effects (Boin et al., 2020; Delfin & Gaillard, 2008; Hore et al., 2018; Wisner & Gaillard, 2009). Taken out of the picture are risks from the stresses and shocks of daily life, especially for the marginalized sector. These *everyday* risks, or extensive risks as defined by United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR, 2015a), include situations

where people face the slow onset of pervasive hazards such as drought or coastal erosion, or for those who live in flood-prone urban slums, polluted or industrial areas, proximity to active volcanoes, river deltas or conflict zones, or whose livelihood is in hazardous locations (Gaillard, 2011; Reyes & Lavell, 2012; UNISDR, 2015a; Wisner & Luce, 1993). Some authors call these pervasive hazards, characterized by being "widespread, diffuse in impact, long, gradual, [and] … more accurately predicted" (Kates, 1976, p. 139; Wisner & Gaillard, 2009). While the mainstream media concentrates on sudden-onset disasters such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and coastal storms, the impacts of pervasive hazards manifest through the livelihood of the people (Wisner & Gaillard, 2009).

Disaster cannot be defined by mere measurement of damaged properties and lives, but by the social structure of norms and values and human interactions (Perry, 2007). As such, an approach that tackles vulnerability to slow-onset hazards at the local context is necessary since such hazards are dynamic and experienced differently from place to place, and their social impacts are difficult to specify and may not be evident at first occurrence (Wilhite, 2003). Examining the everyday lives of the vulnerable sector, such as farmers and fisherfolks directly affected by drought-like seasons and monsoon winds, can provide context regarding communities' experiences and coping strategies. However, identifying the impacts of risk and coping strategies of vulnerable populations, including the agricultural sector, can be a challenge as reports about disasters typically highlight extreme events, such as tropical cyclones (Emergency Events Database [EM-DAT], 2021), even though pervasive hazards such as drought can also affect a considerable number of people (Asian Disaster Reduction Center, 2018). Therefore, livelihood support and disaster management strategies may be inconsistent with the actual local needs and contexts, which are a prerequisite for understanding disaster risk as mentioned in the Sendai Framework[1] (UNISDR, 2015b).

The objective of this paper is to examine the vulnerability and coping strategies of a marginalized sector in terms of their livelihood using a place-based approach. Such an approach elicits the impacts of pervasive hazards, particularly their spatial and temporal aspects, including the adaptive strategies of the marginalized sector, in this case, an agricultural sector in an island setting. The analysis draws on concepts related to the notion of place, which consider risk as socially constructed based on the experiences and social activities of people (Chakraborty et al., 2020; Cutter, 1993; Perry, 2007; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977; Versey, 2021). The main contribution of this paper is its application of a place-based approach for assessing vulnerability and identifying coping strategies, which recognizes that vulnerability is not static and that vulnerable sectors emphasize social bonds in coping with difficulties.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Pervasive Hazards and Vulnerabilities

Environmental location, economic status (Porio, 2011), and even exclusionary political constructs (Chmutina et al., 2016; Curato, 2018) magnify the vulnerabilities of

1 The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, which was enacted at the 3rd United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, promotes the understanding of risks at varying scales, frequency, onset, and causes to serve as a guide in multi-hazard management of disaster risk in development.

marginalized populations. Moreover, several previously unseen events felt primarily by socio-economically challenged groups, such as stress (White & Haas, 1975), threat, misery, and disruption, can be recognized by focusing on the everyday quality of disasters (Curato, 2018). In the 2015 Global Assessment Report, UNISDR (2015a) even identified low severity, persistent events as a central concern for low-income households and communities, in addition to intensive risks, which include severe, low-frequency, and catastrophic events such as tsunamis, earthquakes, and large volcanic eruptions.

In the Philippines, a study conducted by Gaillard and Cadag (2009) showed how weak and limited livelihoods had forced marginalized sectors to live at the foot of dumpsites. Such a situation demonstrates how poor livelihoods and political neglect have further impeded the people living in the dumpsite from recovering in the aftermath of the disastrous mass movement of solid wastes that led to their further marginalization. On a national scale, disasters reflect "neglect of vulnerable groups by national economic and political elites and poor governance" (Wisner & Gaillard, 2009, p. 156). Meanwhile, Gaillard's (2011) study of sudden-onset disasters, such as volcanic eruptions, indicates that risk perception matters in assessing risk. It distinguishes the underlying vulnerabilities deeply rooted in the structures influencing access to resources, history, and culture through perception. It is pertinent to look at how people experience natural hazards and how daily activities shape their risk perceptions (Dalisay & De Guzman, 2016). Considering extensive or everyday risks then means having a high regard for everyday lived experiences, particularly for the process of vulnerability assessment.

Risk Perceptions

When disruptions in the normal or everyday lives of the people are considered as a disaster, several indicators of social vulnerability may be left out, since most of these cues may already be part of their normality, as the findings of Reyes and Lavell (2012) in the Chaco Region in Bolivia show. In addition, social impacts that are absent in socio-demographic data are psychosocial in nature, including psychophysiological effects, such as fatigue, changes in behavior, and stress (Lindell & Prater, 2003; White & Haas, 1975). Extreme events require macro-economic scale interventions, while pervasive hazards may be assessed and resolved by considering the local contexts and capacities of the community. An example is deliberate risk-taking, as shown in studies in Pampanga (Delfin & Gaillard, 2008) and the Albay province (Usamah et al., 2014) respectively, where population pressure and limited access to resources cause Filipinos to settle in hazard-prone areas. People "consciously chose to face a threat" from natural hazards and discount these threats, yet expose themselves to more everyday risks related to poverty and hunger (Delfin & Gaillard, 2008, p. 196). The study by Usamah et al. (2014) in the Albay province with informal settlers highlights the role of a sense of place in building social resilience among their communities. The study concludes that resilience could exist simultaneously with vulnerability through a "strong sense of community, trust among the community members, active community involvement and respect for existing cultures and values" (Usamah et al., 2014).

Therefore, an examination of the varying experiences and practices of people living their *normal* lives while facing everyday risk can portray their vulnerability and the conditions of their marginalization across space and time (Chakraborty et al., 2020; Chambers et al., 1981; Dalisay, 2008; Peters-Guarin et al., 2012; Reyes & Lavell, 2012; Wisner & Gaillard, 2009). Such a portrayal of vulnerability may then result in a more contextualized set of interventions that are suitable for the needs of marginalized sectors.

Place-Based Strategies for Disaster Risk Management

Place-based assessments help identify places of high vulnerability at a small scale (Chakraborty et al., 2020). The role of a sense of place in disaster studies has been chiefly applied to extreme climatic events or particular hazards, such as volcanic eruption and flooding (Anacio et al., 2016; Marshall et al., 2012; Silver & Grek-Martin, 2015). However, a place can also be considered a way of understanding the world by examining the habits and actions of its people. For example, Swapan and Sadeque (2021) indicate that place attachment affects people's decisions in developing countries to stay even when the risk is high, especially if their social capital is high, and that place attachment helps communities to prepare during the pre-disaster period.

It is important to note that experience can be studied not solely at the individual level but also at a community level (Manzo & Perkins, 2006). Furthermore, Masterson et al. (2017) note that the nature of social experiences differs systematically, including social interactions that are place-based. Chakraborty et al. (2020) show that social vulnerability is geographically stratified and that a place-based, differentiated perspective on vulnerability enables the identification of places that are more disadvantaged.

Each organization or unit of society manages risk differently by balancing social justice and economic interest (Rayner & Cantor, 1987). These socio-economic factors have been shown to strongly affect actions or hazard behavior (Cutter, 1993). Hence, risk can have two attributes: (1) social context of risk, including attitude, culture, values, and norm; and (2) social fabric of risk or how people live and how their daily activities influence their perception and behavior (Cutter, 1993). In addition, international and national agencies have recognized traditional knowledge and practices to inform and complement scientific knowledge, policies, and strategies for disaster risk management (Allen, 2006; Cheng & Kim, 2019; Housing and Land Use Regulatory Board, 2015; UNISDR, 2015b). Community-based disaster risk reduction and management strategies hold their value in using the local capacities of the people and in recognizing their role in gathering information for their community plans. Acknowledging local knowledge and adapting indigenous coping strategies may be a better counterpart of the dominant way of understanding disaster risk (Gaillard & Jigyasu, 2016).

Disaster Risk Management at the Local Level in the Philippines

The localization of disaster risk management in the Philippines began in 1978 and was reinforced through the Local Government Code. Based on the suggested procedures for risk assessment by the Supplemental Guidelines on Mainstreaming Climate and Disaster Risks in the Comprehensive Land Use Plan (2015), climate and disaster risk assessment (CDRA) is accomplished by two different but integrative activities:

The first one is Climate Change and Vulnerability Assessment (CCVA) where potential exacerbation of vulnerability is objectively measured, and the second one is disaster risk assessment in which potential areas at risk are mapped out. In CCVA, five exposure units, including urban areas, population, resource production areas, critical points, and lifeline utilities, are examined through varying degrees of disaster thresholds based on the criteria for declaring a state of calamity. These thresholds are paralleled with acceptability ratings from 'highly unacceptable' to 'acceptable'. Vulnerability, therefore, is reduced into numbers and is interpreted based on a risk scoring matrix. Afterwards, areas in the municipality or the city are assigned to three colors, reflecting a risk category: red being high risk, violet moderate, and yellow being low risk areas.

While the organizational structure of disaster risk reduction and management ends with the *barangay*[2] (Fernandez et al., 2012), a traditional practice of mutual help in the community was used to mobilize people at a sub-*barangay* level, called *purok*, in San Francisco, Cebu, which resulted in zero fatalities during the wrath of Typhoon Haiyan. When Super Typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines on November 6, 2013, it left a total of PHP 95 Billion-worth (USD 1,9 Billion) of damage, and 6,300 people died primarily due to storm surge and flood (National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council [NDRMMC], 2013). Among the regions that were greatly affected were the Eastern and Central Visayas. However, the municipality of San Francisco, Cebu, which is the largest among the Camotes group of islands, reported zero casualties due to immediate actions taken by the local government and the residents hours before the estimated landfall of the super typhoon (Ranada, 2014).

Even before the super typhoon, the municipality of San Francisco had already achieved recognition for its disaster risk reduction and management efforts, both locally and internationally. In 2011, the local government of San Francisco received the United Nations Sasakawa Award – a prestigious award that recognizes individuals or institutions who are active and advocates of reducing disaster risk (UNISDR, 2013). Part of their disaster risk management mechanism is the Philippine indigenous way of community organizing and mobilization called the *purok* system – a microstructure of municipal governance at the sub-*barangay* level that is rooted in the idea of *bayanihan* or *pintakasi* (mutual help) (Ang, 1979; Cheng & Kim, 2019; Curato & Calamba, 2020; Matthies, 2017). A study conducted by Noguera (2011) in Sultan Kudarat described *pintakasi* or mutual help as an indigenous approach in responding to community concerns that can be used to plan, implement, and evaluate community-led activities.

Several studies document the achievements of the *purok* system for disaster risk reduction and management (Cheng & Kim, 2019; Fernandez et al., 2012; Matthies, 2017; Ranada, 2014; UNDRR, 2013). The *purok* system follows an existing indigenous social organization for mobilizing local resources in creating local and practical solutions to address community needs. A better model of disaster risk governance can be developed by understanding the local context of disasters and the kinds of established relationships or networks among the affected communities (Lin & Chang, 2020). This "invisible local knowledge", including social relations and experiences, builds capacities to respond to natural hazards (Lin & Chang, 2020, pp. 4-5). "Hazards-of-place

2 *Barangay* is the smallest administrative division in the Philippines and is the native Filipino term for a village.

models" are vital for an intersectional climate agenda because they can represent the difficulties of managing and adapting to climate change among vulnerable groups (Versey, 2021, p. 71). Applying a place-based approach to identify patterns of vulnerability and coping strategies recognizes multiple, latent risks in the community. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework used in the present study, which highlights the experiences of people towards various hazards and the social interactions encompassing the kinds of coping strategies that people implement in times of difficulties.

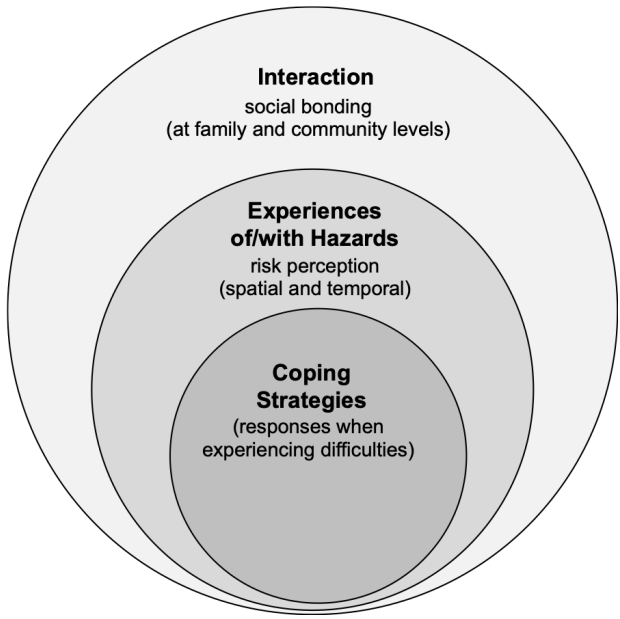

Figure 1. Coping strategies in times of difficulties are influenced by experiences and social interaction.

By assessing vulnerability through the notion of place, which uses the lens of everyday experiences and social interactions, the impacts of hazards across time and space and coping strategies in difficult times become distinguishable. This paper provides evidence in recognizing the value of using a place-based approach for assessing vulnerability and identifying coping strategies. This paper then concludes with some recommendations for future research and policy making.

METHODOLOGY

Study Site

In order to apply a place-based approach for identifying vulnerability and coping strategies, the island of San Francisco, Cebu was selected as a study site. San Francisco is an island municipality in the Camotes Sea, east of mainland Cebu (Table 1). Three *barangays* were selected to capture the geographical settings from the mountainous to the coastal areas of the municipality (Figure 2). These are *barangays* Sta. Cruz,

Montealegre, and San Isidro. Barangay Sta. Cruz represented the north district and is the third most populated *barangay* next to Esperanza and Consuelo. The north district represented the municipality's flat area and coastal area, together with Barangay San Isidro, for the south district. Finally, Barangay Montealegre represented the mountainous area and the central district. It is also the second least populated *barangay* in the municipality. As of 2018, there are 1,406 people in Barangay Montealegre, while Barangays San Isidro and Sta. Cruz have 4,688 and 6,222 people, respectively (Barangay Profiles, 2018). There are 120 functional *purok* in the municipality where each *purok* covers approximately 250 people, or 50 households.

CATEGORY	DETAIL
Land Area	9, 742 ha
Population	55, 180
No. of Occupied Housing Units	12, 212
Class	Third class municipality
Annual Income	PHP 83.5 million (USD 1.8 million)
Number of *Barangays* (Villages)	15

Table 1. Profile of San Francisco, Cebu (Barangay Profiles, 2018; Philippine Statistics Authority, 2015).

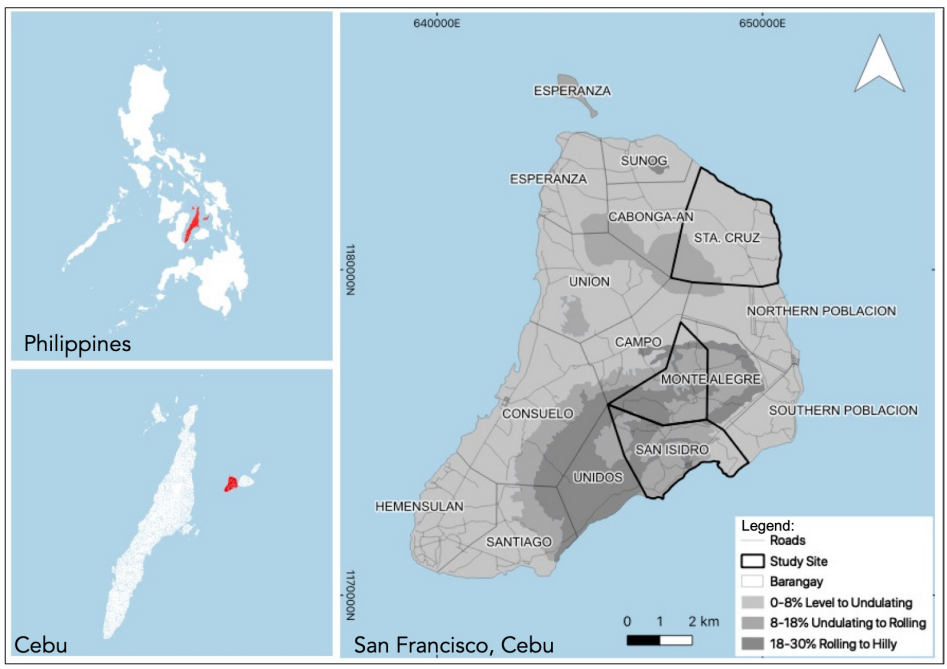

Figure 2. Study sites represented the topography of the island: Sta. Cruz (north, coastal, and flat), Montealegre (central and mountainous) and San Isidro (south and coastal).

Most of the families on the island are involved in crop farming and fishing. Their agricultural products are corn, coconut, fruits, vegetables, salt, freshwater fish, and livestock. At least 28 fish species are thriving on the coasts of the island, including *danggit* (*Singannidae* sp.), *pangan* (*Apogonidae* sp.), *talakitok* (*Carangidae* sp.), and *mangsi* (*Clupeidae* sp.). In addition, individual households raise farm animals such as cattle and carabao as an alternative for crop production (Municipal Planning and Development Office, 2015).

Household Survey

To gather the experiences and coping strategies of farmers and fisherfolks in the island, a household survey was conducted. A survey questionnaire was devised to generate the relevant information from the respondents, such as their socio-economic characteristics (i.e., age, sex, migrant or non-migrant), experiences of hazards, and level of place attachment. The first part of the survey questionnaire asked for the demographic profile of the respondents followed by a set of open-ended questions to document their past and recurring risk experiences and their particular coping strategies regarding the risks they identified.

The household survey was administered using stratified random sampling to represent the geographical settings and living conditions of the municipality. A total of 399 respondents were surveyed with an even proportion from the three sites, as 35% of the total sample size came from Barangay Sta. Cruz, 33% from Barangay San Isidro, and 32% from Barangay Montealegre. The survey was conducted in the Cebuano and Tagalog languages, transcribed and translated in English. A group of local enumerators was trained to conduct the household survey using the Cebuano language one week before the actual data gathering. The training also included orientation and a workshop for data encoding.

Short interviews with local farmers and fisherfolks, and local government officials, including the agriculture officer, social welfare officer, and disaster risk reduction officer aimed to identify the general situation of the agricultural sector to supplement the survey results. Secondary data including the comprehensive land use plan and local disaster risk reduction and management plans were used to triangulate and validate the data gathered from the survey and supplemental interviews.

Data Analysis

Responses from the household survey regarding events, impacts, and coping strategies were analyzed using frequency counting and tabular analysis through the data analysis tools of Microsoft Excel. The hazards and events indicated in the survey were pre-identified from the Local Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Plan of the municipality. A blank space for unlisted hazards and events was also added to include those that are not found on the survey questionnaire. Analysis of the open-ended questions in the survey used a summative type of content analysis where keywords and themes were predefined as concept choices to focus on specific subject matters (Carley, 1993; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The coding framework used in the study focused on two themes based on community-based approaches for disaster risk management: place-based experiences of hazards and coping strategies of the community.

The experiences of the participants with regard to weather and seasons were cross-validated with secondary data including climate observations from national agencies and existing reports on municipal profile and disaster risk management plans.

RESULTS

Spatiality and Seasonality of Hazard Impacts

Most of the respondents were female (71.93%) and married (82.71%) and had resided in San Francisco for an average period of 38 years; farming, animal raising, and fishing were the primary sources of livelihood (Table 2). San Francisco is an agrarian community where one-third of the population acquires profit from agricultural and animal production, and most of them are farm and fishing workers. As of 2015, there are 19 active farmers and fisherfolk organizations on the island and two cooperatives. In addition, national agencies, civil society organizations, and private institutions have also supported the local livelihood in the municipality. Seventy percent (70%) of the total municipal land area is cultivated with corn, coconut, cassava, fruit trees, and citrus, while the remaining land is planted with vegetables, root crops, taro, and legumes (Municipal Planning and Development Office, 2015). Rainfall is evenly distributed throughout the year on the island (Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration [PAGASA], 2021). Farmers plant crops in two cycles within 12 months. The Municipal Agriculture Office documented these farming activities to start from March to May when rainfall is less. Farmers prepare the land and wait for the crops to grow until the last week of August or the first week of September. Farmers start harvesting from September to November until the crop cycle repeats.

CHARACTERISTICS	F	%
Total	**399**	
Gender		
Male	112	28.07
Female	287	71.93
Age		
18-30	32	8.02
26-35	98	24.56
36-45	73	18.30
56-65	71	17.79
66-75	74	18.55
75-85	41	10.28
> 85	10	2.51
Sources of Income		
Farming, Fishing	249	62.41
Non-Farming, Non-Fishing	146	36.49
None/Retired	4	1.00

Table 2. Socio-economic profile of the survey respondents.

Harvesting for the second crop season would happen between December and February of the following year. However, the crop cycle might change in the future with the climate projections for 2050. Based on PAGASA projections, the months of September to October have the highest seasonal rainfall for the province of Cebu, while March to May will gain the highest average mean temperature (PAGASA, 2018). The local farmers already feel this delay in rainfall (Municipal Agriculture Office, personal communication, September 12, 2018). On the other hand, coconut farmers are in the field every day as they harvest daily to make coconut wine. The mountainous areas like Barangay Montealegre benefit from its topography by growing coconut, making them the largest coconut wine producer on the island. They harvest 30 liters of coconut wine per day.

As of 2015, 60% of the total household population lives below the poverty threshold compared to 21.1% at the national level. Agricultural households earn an average amount of PHP 15,000 (USD 330) per year from farming and fishing alone without subsistence crops. With this, the role of a farmworker also doubles during the dormant periods in the farm from June until they start harvesting in August. So, while waiting for harvest, farmers also do hook-and-line fishing for subsistence. Similar observations were documented by Dalisay (2008) regarding the influence of the changing seasons on the eating or food pattern of people in Batangas and Mindoro. If harvesting is on time and plenty, farmers and workers can buy white rice instead of corn grits since they can now afford the former. However, with the delay in the rain and issues with low fish catch, they usually serve corn grits instead.

Meanwhile, most respondents frequently experienced typhoons (82.96%) and drought-like seasons (68.17%), as shown in Figure 3. However, drought-like seasons were more intense for the respondents than when they recalled the last time that they had experienced a typhoon. Typhoon Haiyan was the most remembered event for them, even though a much more recent event happened during the conduct of

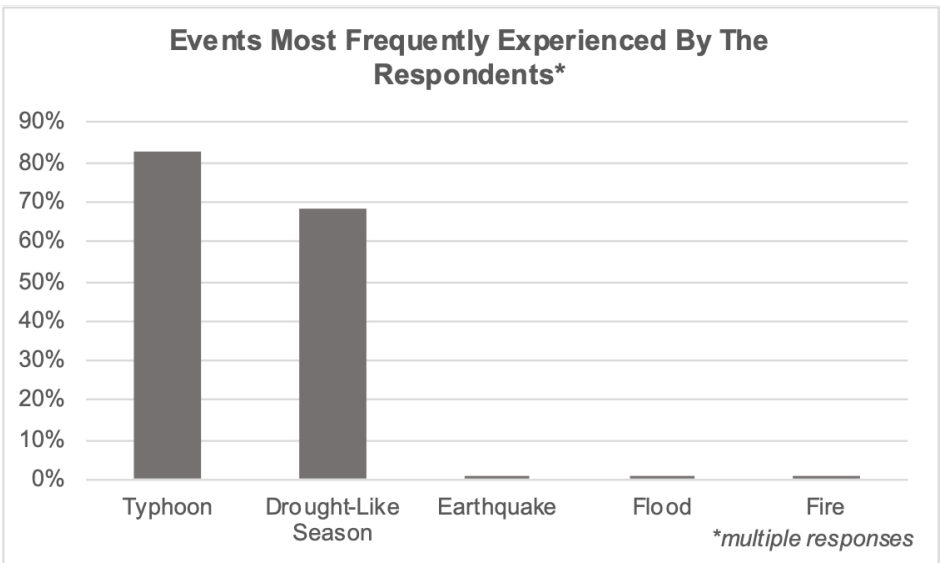

Figure 3. Events most frequently experienced by the respondents.

the study – Tropical Storm Urduja, which killed 27 people in the nearby province of Biliran (Andone & Faidell, 2017). Perceptions on the impacts of hazards at individual and community levels were gathered, as shown in Figures 4 and 5.

Both typhoons (60.65%) and drought-like seasons (50.38%) affect the respondents physiologically at the individual level (e.g., fatigue). Psychological impacts, including anxiety, depression, and grief were higher for typhoons (52.88%) than for drought-like seasons (44.61%). The behavior of one-third of the respondents (30.58%) was

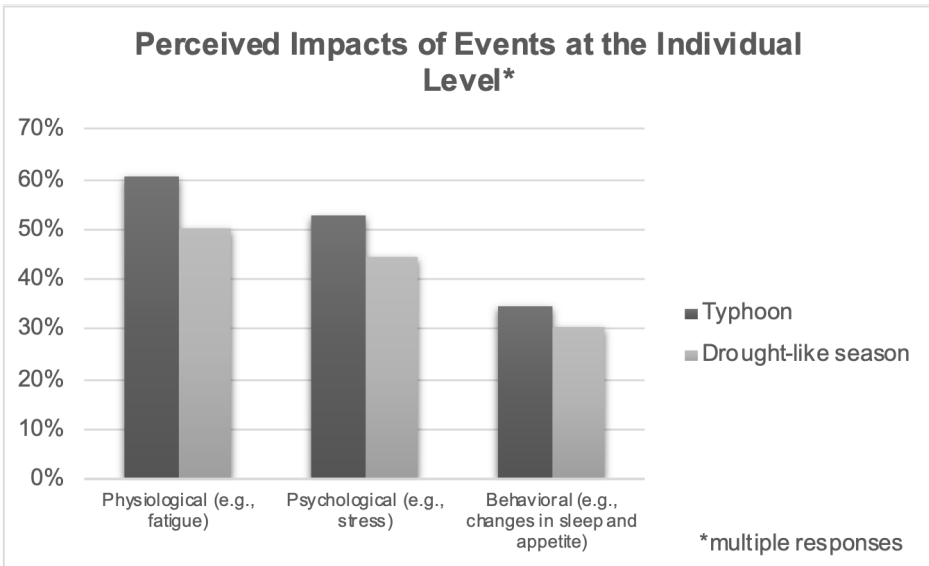

Figure 4. Perceived impacts of events at the individual level.

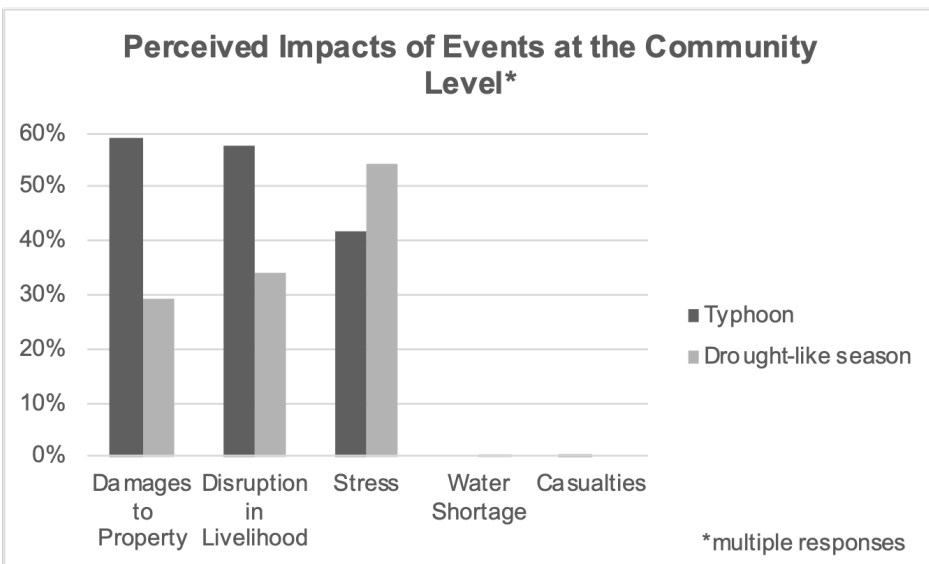

Figure 5. Perceived impacts of events at the community level.

affected during drought-like seasons, while 34.34% were similarly affected – including changes in sleep and appetite – during typhoons as well. The impact of drought-like seasons at the community level is higher in psychological terms, as it causes stress (54.14%). Stress is defined through manifestations of being too anxious and getting sick due to imbalances in health status. In contrast, typhoons impair the properties of the community (59.15%), disrupt the livelihood at the community level (57.64%), and damage their property (29.32%). Respondents also noted water shortage (0.25%) during drought-like seasons and casualties (0.5%) during a typhoon.

Another attribute of disaster highlighted during the data collection was the spatiality of the events. According to the fisherfolks, the impacts of monsoon winds on the municipality are location-dependent. Typhoons affect the entire municipality (PAGASA, 2018), while monsoon winds induce challenges to the residents depending on the orientation of their *barangay* and the direction of the wind. Barangay Sta. Cruz, which is located in the northern part of the municipality, experiences huge sea waves during the northeast monsoon (*amihan)* from September to February, while Barangay San Isidro is affected by the southwest monsoon (*habagat)*, which occurs from June to September. Fishing activities are immensely influenced by monsoon winds. According to the Municipal Agriculture Office, low fish catch was also observed during the past years due to climate change.

Moreover, fisherfolks shared that they struggle to lose potential harvest due to illegal consignees who deal with big commercial fishing vessels to share the total revenue from the fish catch. Some local fisherfolk get involved with these illegal activities because environmental policies limit them to use non-destructive fishing gears and techniques only, such as fishnet, hook-and-line, and fish aggregating devices. Big commercial fishing vessels communicate with local fisherfolk to gather fish caught by the community's improvised fish aggregating device called *payao*, which bypasses the formal communication among the fisherfolk's organization and reduces the total potential fish catch for the community. Consequently, fisherfolks lose potential revenue from fish catch, which they could have acquired, if not for the monsoon winds inhibiting their small boats from sailing far. Only the big commercial fishing vessels can navigate across huge sea waves. The locals then rely on the fish catch of these commercial boats, hence, illegal consigning. On the other hand, farmers are also affected by the delay of the rainy season, which sets back the harvest period and the second crop cycle. For the fisherfolk, the hardship period starts from June, and

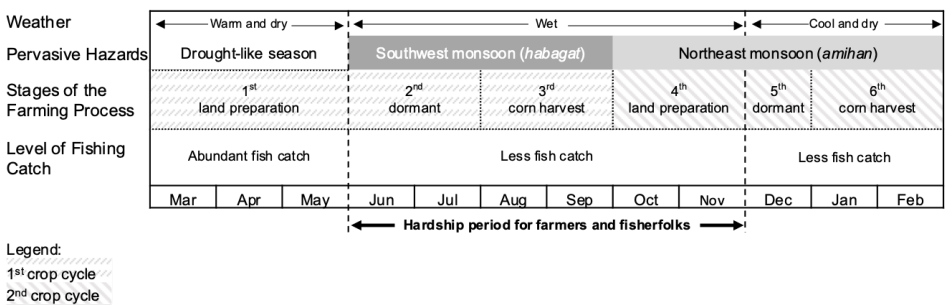

Figure 6. Impacts of weather patterns and pervasive hazards to local livelihood activities in San Francisco, Cebu, based on experiences of the agricultural sector.

recovery begins towards the end of November. During these months, the southwest monsoon affects the fishing activities in the south district.

Figure 6 illustrates the events and experiences of the agricultural population in 12 months based on the household survey and interviews from the municipal agriculturist, *barangay* chieftains, and local farmers and fisherfolks. The diagram was validated with municipal officials and local coordinators.

Mutual Strategies in Times of Difficulty

As for coping strategies, most respondents (51.63%) look for an alternative livelihood, such as animal raising, selling food, gathering firewood, and doing laundry (Figure 7). They also ask for help (9.27%) from relatives, neighbors, employers, or the government. Only 2% of the respondents preferred to have an architectural intervention in their house, while the other 2% preferred to transfer to another place. Architectural intervention includes rehabilitating a decaying segment of the house or constructing additional support beams for the roofs and house repairs. Bankoff (2003) noted that architectural intervention is a practical coping mechanism as it seeks to minimize risk impacts and losses instead of transferring or moving away from the hazards themselves.

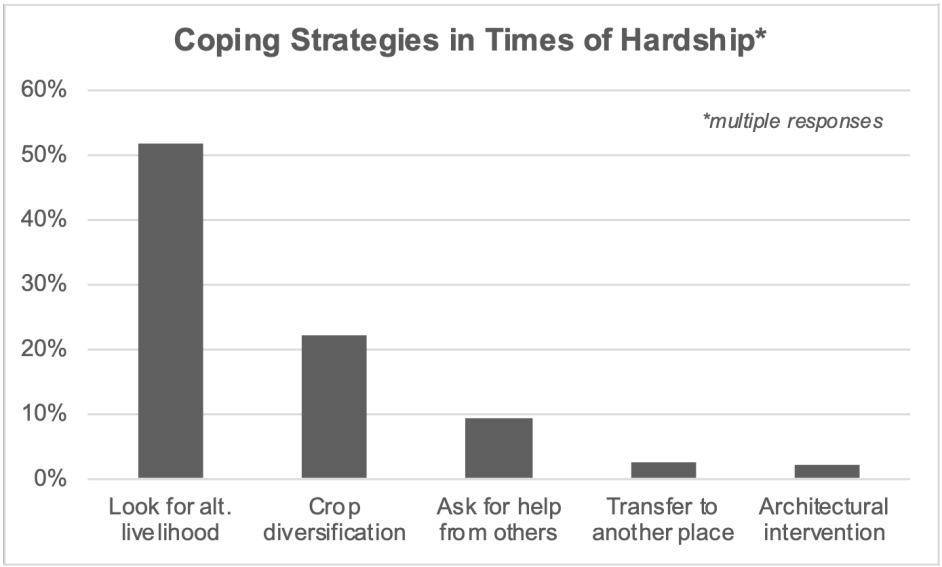

Figure 7. Coping strategies of households in times of hardship.

For extreme events, such as typhoons, the community implements an "adopt-a-family scheme" as a crisis response or evacuation strategy. This scheme utilizes the capacity of the sturdier house structures, usually owned by upper-income families, to be used as a temporary evacuation site during a typhoon event. Families living in dwellings built from light materials are assigned and listed as evacuees to specific sturdier houses. An average of 20 people fit in such houses.

As for livelihood, farming goes together with fishing, particularly for residents living near the coast. Full-time farmworkers catch fish to acquire additional income while waiting for their crops to be harvested, while fisherfolk apply for jobs requiring construction skills or additional workforce. In addition, the women of the households usually engage in selling by-products from crops and fish. Some also opt to diversify their crops (22.31%) by planting cassava between the corn stalks and other profitable vegetables to sustain their food needs during the lean months from June to August.

Mutual help manifests in both seeking help from relatives and through the *purok* system. Although the *purok* system could be improved in terms of organization and institutional anchoring (Braga, 2016; Matthies, 2017), the system's core value is *pintakasi,* or *bayanihan* in Tagalog, which roughly translates as 'mutual help'. Community members can assess their disaster risk through the *purok* system, which is more granular and detailed – for example, through the maps they use for their local climate and disaster risk assessment. The municipal government utilizes the risk assessment at the *purok* level to create a local climate change action plan and a municipal disaster risk reduction and management plan.

Table 3 summarizes the comparison between extreme events and pervasive hazards based on the household survey and supplemental interviews. For the perceived impacts of the hazards, respondents shared that they are emotionally affected by pervasive hazards, while their coping strategies for extreme events and pervasive hazards are both embedded in the level of their social relationships with others. During times of extreme events and pervasive hazards, a diverse set of government support is provided, such as the availability of cash transfer, crop insurance, and irrigation system construction.

One particular government intervention for the vulnerable sector that received varying perceptions among the respondents is cash transfer. While the local social welfare officer thinks that it has some success, most respondents believe it makes the people dependent on external support when proper social preparation needs to be done instead. According to a long-time resident of the island, people need to be resourceful and not just rely on cash transfers: "People easily forget because they have their priorities in life. They should look into the opportunities around them, focus on what they have and not on what they lack." (key informant, personal communication, 2018).

IMPLICATIONS

There are several theoretical and practical implications from the results of this study. Crossing a bridge is a useful analogy in understanding the benefits of looking at vulnerability through a place-based approach. The one end of the bridge represents the 'hazards', while the other end, or the destination, stands for 'survival'. The struggles or difficulties, portrayed by the bridge, that people go through manifest in their daily experiences at a given time and place. Although post-disaster situations occupy most of the news and data reports, they screen out people's daily struggles. Addressing disasters as battle situations puts less weight on daily concerns, such as safety, well-being, and equality (Delfin & Gaillard, 2008). Hence, integrating the everyday practices or habits of people with disaster management is necessary.

CATEGORIES	EXTREME EVENT (such as typhoon)	PERVASIVE HAZARDS (such as monsoon winds, drought-like seasons)
Onset	• sudden	• slow
Arrival	• typhoons landfall around September to November	• all year round (monsoon winds, warm and dry months)
Perceived Impacts	• damages to property	• stress due to lack of income
	• disruption in livelihood	• disruption in livelihood
Exposure (including urban areas, population, resource production areas, critical points and lifeline utilities)	• municipal-wide	• site-specific
Coping strategies	• look for an alternative livelihood	• look for an alternative livelihood
	• ask for help from relatives and friends	• ask for help from relatives and friends
	• adopt-a-family	• utilization of *purok* system
	• utilization of *purok* system	
Government (national and local) support	• conditional cash transfer	• conditional cash transfer
	• distribution of relief goods	• insurance coverage for farmers
	• improvement of road condition and road construction	• construction of irrigation system
	• provision of pump boats	• improvement of road condition and road construction
	• provision of typhoon shelter	• provision of typhoon shelter
	• conduct of emergency response trainings and drills	• conduct of emergency response trainings and drills
	• organizing livelihood programs	• organizing livelihood programs

Table 3. Comparison of experiences and coping strategies between extreme events and pervasive hazards based on household survey and supplemental interviews.

Farmers and fisherfolks 'cross' or survive difficulties through mutual help from the other members of the community. Incorporating a place-based approach for vulnerability assessment therefore contributes to the identification of varied difficulties faced and coping strategies used by the agricultural sector on the island. The results of the study indicate that contextualization is essential to parallel interventions to the varying experiences of hazard impacts by the community. A "calendar of difficulties" can help decision-makers to define the relevance of their programs to improve the livelihood conditions of the agricultural sector. Hardship periods may differ since the climate is changing. The hardships resulting from seasonality also differ across socio-economic groups, even if they are affected by the same environmental conditions. Nevertheless, the concepts of seasonality and locality can guide the timing of (government) support for specific hazards and their impacts. With such a system, local communities could also analyze their own vulnerabilities and capacities (Adger et al., 2011; Peters-Guarin et al., 2012).

Lastly, social interactions influence coping strategies. The residents of San Francisco cope with crises by looking for alternative livelihoods with the help of their relatives and extended family networks more than the government and other

organizations. As Allen (2006) noted for the Philippine context, kinship networks act as "safety-net support to resist shocks and stresses" (p. 85) because these provide access to opportunities that can improve one's standard of living. Moreover, the residents' insularity from the mainland influences the kind of social bonds and adaptive strategies implemented in times of hardship. Social bonds have proven as useful, especially in the existence of the *purok* system. However, with the varying needs and contexts of community members, local decision-makers need to be conscious about how activities and projects are supported in the *purok* and are given priority as one goes up the hierarchy of authority (i.e., municipal and provincial). If left unchecked, the vulnerable sector may be pushed back in the participatory process (Allen, 2006; Mohan & Stokke, 2000). The use of community-based disaster risk reduction and management strategies, like the *purok* system, over other disaster risk reduction approaches, such as engineering-based, ecosystem-based, and restrictive planning, emphasizes net social benefits with long-term sustainability (DasGupta & Shaw, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Several studies have pointed out the periodic struggles of marginalized sectors particularly with pervasive or extensive risks. This paper examined the vulnerability and coping strategies of farmers and fisherfolks with extreme weather events and pervasive hazards in San Francisco, Cebu, using a place-based approach. This approach uses the context of place to understand people's daily experiences in the agricultural sector and their coping strategies in times of difficulties. The results showed that social vulnerability is not static, as hazard impacts vary spatially and temporally. Meanwhile, social relations affect the coping strategies of farmers and fisherfolks with natural hazards.

Understanding human interactions and social experiences lies at the core of a place-based approach towards identifying vulnerability and coping strategies. Qualitative methods for validating objective risk assessment become more relevant in addition to the current guidelines of assessing climate and disaster risk in the Philippines. As vulnerability is reduced to figures or risk scores in the current process of risk assessment in the country, a hazard may pose more harm to the marginalized sectors in terms of who and which risk areas should be prioritized in disaster risk management. It is necessary to consider the social contexts of risk, including the people or places at risk, based on the knowledge, practices, and values of the community.

The local government of San Francisco needs to contextualize their sectoral developmental projects across a given space and time. Programs could be set to be implemented on a season-based manner. The focus of livelihood programs should depend on whether a specific district experiences the negative impacts of a monsoon wind. However, programs for disaster risk management need to be flexible and adaptive to the changing environment.

Local leadership and governance are an important element in implementing community-based initiatives such as the *purok* system. A simple strategy might be to allow all existing community organizations, including farmers and fisherfolks, to assess their vulnerability and adaptation. The outputs could be cross-evaluated with the assessment of the stakeholders, which are the local leaders and technical experts.

The results could provide qualitative information as to how and why the local people show particular vulnerability scores. Another recurring hazard that was not included in this study but that can be considered a "creeping crisis" (Boin et al., 2020) is the rise of the sea level. Future research could also map the daily activities or practices of the people so that they are geographically located and better utilized in terms of risk mapping. Likewise, documenting experiences in the agriculture sector for both cropping seasons can refine the systematic recording in contrast to a limited period of data collection.

Ultimately, community-based approaches for disaster risk management must be seen as a broader aspect of planning and disaster prevention (Allen, 2006). Still, gathering people's experiences of place can be a practical and relevant pursuit to achieve the Priority for Action I of the Sendai Framework, which is understanding risk in all its dimensions.

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DISCLOSURE

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Yaoi Media Consumption and Travel Motivation: Evidence from Filipino Viewers of Thai Boys' Love Series

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The Thai *yaoi* culture is getting a lot of attention in several parts of the world. Numerous Thai boy's love (BL) series are a huge hit in Thailand and other countries. Despite the notable success of Thai *yaoi* and BL culture, there is less attention given to this topic in past studies and literature. Moreover, no study has investigated how *yaoi* culture may affect travel motivation. Hence, the present study examines the effect of *yaoi* media consumption on travel motivation of Filipino viewers of Thai boys' love series. A prediction approach was employed, and partial least squares (PLS) path modelling was used to measure the hypothesized relationships. The study reveals that all dimensions of cultural proximity significantly affect Thai *yaoi* media consumption, and Thai *yaoi* media consumption was found to have an influence on emotional involvement and travel motivation. Emotional involvement was also found to significantly affect travel motivation, and, at the same time, act as a mediator between Thai *yaoi* media consumption and travel motivation. The current research offers novel theoretical insights about media consumption and its relation to travel motivation in the context of Thai pop-cultural boys' love series.

Keywords: Cultural Proximity; Emotional Involvement; Thai BL Series; Travel Motivation; *Yaoi* Media

INTRODUCTION

Tourism relies heavily on the various projections of favorable images to attract people to visit a destination (Pan, 2011). There are myriads of factors that affect the level of motivation of tourists when choosing a destination to visit. Different media platforms massively influence the tourism industry as they affect tourism destination images (Chang, 2015). Several studies have identified that media platforms have an impact in shaping destination images and the level of motivation among tourists (Chang, 2015; Damanik et al., 2019). Visual media such as television and movies, which are considered part of the daily lives of people, shape favorable and unfavorable images toward a destination (Hahm & Tasci, 2019; Xu et al., 2020).

One factor that has an influence in shaping destination image and tourists' motivation is popular culture (pop culture). Pop culture of a country has been utilized in promoting tourism destinations (Iwashita, 2008). The different representations in a country's pop culture have been used as media for entertainment, as a knowledge source, and for appreciating the world (Chang, 2015). Television has been considered a potent medium in transmitting pop culture to various audiences. Through production of TV drama series and movies, the pop culture of a country is easily conveyed to mass audiences (Kim & Richardson, 2003). When viewers watch TV drama series and movies, their exposure to these programs transforms their viewership to traveling to places (Gjorgievski & Trpkova, 2012). With this, film-induced tourism has been getting more attention because of the influence of films in the development of tourism (Ng & Chan, 2020).

The growth of the audio-visual sector, the emergence of new media platforms, and the rise of TV and video consumption on mobile phones have contributed a lot in the formation of opportunities in the tourism industry (Vila et al., 2021). Television series, employing popular celebrities and directors, and embedding attractive and unique shooting locations, have reached wider audiences (Rajaguru, 2013; Vila et al., 2021; Yen & Croy, 2016) and have generated strong connections with audiences because of extended and repetitive viewing (Schmidt et al., 2019). Many locations of TV drama series have experienced growth as manifested in the number of visits among tourists (Ng & Chan, 2020).

Aside from the massive impact of Korean pop culture around the world, Thai pop culture is also currently attaining curiosity in different parts of the globe. Thai TV dramas, commonly known as *lakorn*, are getting attention among viewers, and Thailand is now considered a new player in media circulation in Asia (Jirattikorn, 2018). With the upsurge of *lakorn* also comes the rise of the *yaoi* phenomenon in Thailand (Prasannam, 2019), which involves media genres portraying romantic love between two men. In Thailand, *yaoi* TV drama series are popularly known as "*Y* (wai) series," short for *yaoi* series, and in other countries this genre is commonly called boys' love (BL) series (Baudinette, 2019; Prasanman, 2019).

It has been noted from past studies that pop culture, such as TV drama series and movies, influences travel motivation (Chang, 2015; Damanik et al., 2019; Ng & Chan, 2020; Rajaguru, 2013; Vila et al., 2021). Furthermore, TV drama series and movies have the propensity to arouse emotional engagement among viewers. The formation of attitudes and personal emotions towards a TV series or movie has been argued by prior film-induced tourism studies (Chang, 2015; Kim, 2012; Lee et al., 2008). Furthermore cultural proximity plays an important factor in the travel motivation process (Chang, 2015).

Many of the prior studies on the factors affecting travel motivation are in the context of Korean pop culture or the *Hallyu* (Chang, 2015; Gong & Tung, 2017; Kim et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2012; Rittichainuwat & Rattanaphinanchai, 2015). There is a scarcity of studies addressing the rising popularity of *lakorn*, and, in particular, of Thai BL series and how *yaoi* culture affects travel motivation. With the increasing popularity of Thai BL series and the growing fandom of Thai BL culture in several countries (Baudinette, 2019; Carreon, 2020; Koaysomboon, 2020; Yukari, 2020; Yuqiao, 2020), the need to investigate the *yaoi* phenomenon in relation to travel

motivation is not only timely and relevant but also will provide a different way of examining film-induced tourism. Based on the literature review, there is no single study that investigates how *lakorn*, especially Thai BL series, affects travel motivation. Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by exploring how cultural proximity influences *yaoi* media consumption towards Thai BL series, which in turn affects travel motivation. Additionally, since it has been noted in the past literature that emotional involvement towards TV drama series affects travel motivation, the present study also scrutinizes the mediating effect of emotional involvement on the link between *yaoi* media consumption and travel motivation. Based on the primary aim of the study, the following are the research questions:

1. How does cultural proximity influence the Thai *yaoi* media consumption of the participants?
2. How do Thai *yaoi* media consumption and emotional involvement, directly and indirectly, influence the travel motivation of the participants?

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Film-induced Tourism

Film-induced tourism is a type of tourism where visitors discover the location or destination that appeared in a movie, TV drama, or drama series (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006). Shooting locations of movies and TV dramas are now considered powerful tools in attracting and arousing the interest of viewers to visit a particular tourism destination (Kim & Kim, 2018). More and more researchers and practitioners have been interested in how films affect tourism destinations (Kim & Kim, 2018; Kim et al., 2019; Teng & Chen, 2020).

It has been noted by prior studies that film-induced tourism is formed due to the increasing relationship between tourism and popular media (Gammack, 2005; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Ng & Chan, 2020). For instance, watching a TV drama provides a similar escapism attribute (Carl et al., 2007) and unique experience (Gjorgievski & Trpkova, 2012). Moreover, according to Huang (2009), TV dramas have the capacity to empower individuals to better understand other tourism destinations outside their normal territory. Beeton (2010) and Zeng et al. (2015) even argued that these TV dramas provide viewers an experience of the depicted location that may induce them to visit those destinations.

Yaoi Media Consumption and the Thai BL Series Phenomenon

The explosion of Japanese media, such as anime and manga, led to the fame of the *yaoi* subgenre around the globe. *Yaoi* is a Japanese term that refers to media (e.g., anime, artwork, short stories, and comics) created by fans where the theme is concentrated on homoerotic romantic love between two men (Mizoguchi, 2003; Zsila et al., 2018). This *yaoi* phenomenon that started in Japan is now part of the popular culture of Thailand.

The earliest account of Thai *yaoi* culture was in the 1990s in the cartoon *phuchai* that was translated into Thai language (Nainapat, 2017). In 2007, "Love of Siam,"

an acclaimed gay romance movie, was a blockbuster film. The movie was considered the first BL film (Lertwichayaroj, 2017; Vespada, 2017) that attracted a lot of *yaoi* fans (Lertwichyaroj, 2017). In 2014, "Lovesick the Series," a Thai drama series depicting male-male romantic relationship was broadcast on satellite TV by the Mass Communication Organization of Thailand (MCOT) and brought a lot of viewership. The popularity of "Lovesick the Series" among Thai viewers broke the tradition of male-female romance in a typical Thai TV drama (also called *lakorn*). After the success of the said series, BL culture became a staple in the media landscape of Thailand (Baudinette, 2019; Vespada, 2017).

With the rising admiration for *yaoi* culture from across the region, it has been identified that Thai BL series could be a primary source of entertainment export (Koaysomboon, 2020). Thai BL series have penetrated the markets of some countries including China (Yuqiao, 2020), Indonesia (Nugroho, 2020), the Philippines (Carreon, 2020), and other parts of world (Watson & Jirik, 2018). Despite the male-male romance being portrayed in Thai BL series, the target audience of the *yaoi* genre is not only the LGBT community, but also, mostly young, women (Babal, 2019; Watson & Jirik, 2018). For instance, in the Philippines most of the Filipino avid followers of Thai BL series are young women. The plot of Thai BL series does not only revolve on homoerotic male-male relationships, but it also incorporates romance, love, and to some extent, homophobia (Babal, 2019). With the advent of the Thai *yaoi* genre, an exact opposite of the conventional male-female relationships in Filipino TV dramas, more and more Filipino viewers are consuming the Thai BL culture through *yaoi* TV series (Carreon, 2020).

The Thai BL phenomenon is now an integral component of Thai pop culture. Looking at the context of *yaoi* culture, viewers consume Thai BL series because these TV dramas are characterized by pro-gay attitudes and romantic love without gender. These Thai BL series allow viewers to understand themselves better and provide them the opportunity to self-analyze and understand sexual dilemmas in a much better sense. The entertainment value, emotional elements and the aesthetic appeal add more to the propensity of viewers to consume more Thai BL series (Zsila et al., 2018). With all identified reasons and motives, this is how Thai *yaoi* media consumption is operationally defined in the present study.

Cultural Proximity

Culture is regarded as a factor that influences the behavior of consumers, and, in particular, of tourist behavior (Li et al., 2015). Prior studies even identified authentic culture and cultural proximity as factors in visiting a tourism destination (Chang, 2015; Lu et al., 2019; Su et al., 2011). As a result, the cultural proximity theory is often utilized in the field of media consumption. It espouses that viewers would look for media products that are similar or proximate to their background (Lu et al., 2019; Straubhaar, 1991). Cultural proximity is about identity sharing and the feeling of belongingness to certain groups, sharing cultural similarities such as geography, history, ethnicity, values, language, and religion, among others (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005; Lu et al., 2019; Su et al., 2011). In the context of media studies, cultural proximity constitutes preferences of viewers in terms of social, cultural, political, economic, historical,

and linguistic aspects of a TV program (Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994). Like many other countries, Thailand and the Philippines share similarities in geography, values, and a concept of collectivism. Cultural connections between Thais and Filipinos are evident in several aspects including being service-minded, belief in the existence of spiritual beings, a happy-go-lucky personality, and superstitions (Bohwongprasert, 2013).

Geographic proximity refers to physical distance between two players (Howells, 2002), and, in the case of the present study, between two countries (Chang, 2015) – the Philippines and Thailand. Values, on the other hand, are the enduring beliefs that guide actions and judgments of individuals or groups in different situations and circumstances. They are the utmost manifestation of culture that can affect the behaviors of an individual (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Li et al., 2015). Collectivism, in the context of the present study, refers to similarities of two nations in terms of attitudes towards group members, individuals and society, harmony within groups, and interpersonal conflict (Su et al., 2011). As emphasized in the theory of cultural proximity, viewers consider consuming media products that are proximate to their cultural background (Lu et al., 2019). Furthermore, cultural proximity is a vital factor in understanding why viewers accept or reject a particular TV program (Straubhaar, 1991). Since media, including TV dramas, are expressions of everyday life, consumption of media products by viewers is likely to be affected by how the media portrays similarities of cultural characteristics (DeLorme & Reid, 1999). In a specific study, Anh (2016) argued that the reason why Vietnamese viewers consume TV dramas of Thailand and the Philippines is due to cultural proximity. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H_{1a}. Geographic proximity significantly influences Thai yaoi media consumption.

H_{1b}. Values significantly influence Thai yaoi media consumption.

H_{1c}. Collectivism significantly influences Thai yaoi media consumption.

Emotional Involvement

Media viewers may form a bond with the characters of a TV drama. The level of audience involvement has been regarded as a construct of media use (Kim, 2012). Audience involvement is grounded on the parasocial theory that suggests that an audience may build a connection with the characters portrayed in media (Giles, 2002). It has been highlighted by past studies that the involvement of audiences may come from vicarious, emphatic, and emotional responses (Kim & Kim, 2017; Kim & Kim, 2018; Reijnders, 2010). For example, TV drama viewers' emotional involvement is contended to be a result of their identification and assimilation to the consumed TV drama (Kim & Kim 2017; Kim & Kim, 2018). Thus, in the present study, emotional involvement is defined as the connection formed between the viewers and the characters in Thai BL series.

Audience involvement can be based on emotions. Emotion has been considered to affect the decision of a viewer (Murphy et al., 2011). Prior studies have suggested that TV viewers are often faced with emotionalized presentations (Angelini et al., 2012; Mutz & Gerke, 2018). When they consume media products such as TV dramas, the

emotional involvement of viewers may come from the drama's plot and characters, sequence of narratives, special effects, music, and other unique features. The overall emotional experience establishes the connection of a viewer to a TV drama (Chang, 2015; Liu & Pratt, 2019). The level of affinity to the characters of a TV drama intensifies the level of emotional connection of viewers. Furthermore, TV drama series enhance the connection between the viewer and characters (Connell, 2005). Hence, it is hypothesized that:

H_{2a}. Thai yaoi media consumption significantly influences emotional involvement.

Travel Motivation

Travel motivation is considered a vital force that affects the decision of an individual to travel (Chang, 2015; Li & Cai, 2012). In film-induced tourism studies, the success of portrayal of a location or a destination in a film attracts viewers to visit those places (Gjorgievski & Trpkova, 2012; Macionis, 2004). Moreover, TV dramas provide an opportunity for viewers to experience a destination, and, thus, induce them to visit the featured place (Beeton, 2010; Zeng et al., 2015). It has been noted that TV dramas are now considered an integral factor in arousing the interest of viewers to travel (Iwashita, 2008).

Viewers of TV drama series are now more exposed to the plot and characters of the story. Their exposure augments their internal motivation to visit a destination (Chang, 2015; Vila et al., 2021). TV drama series allow viewers to have deeper connections with the series itself. Since the exposure of viewers to TV drama series tends to be longer, it permits the formation of intimacy with the locations featured in the program. Accordingly, the pattern of viewing and the travel behavior of the audience may be affected by these TV drama series (Chang, 2015; Kim & Long, 2012). The consumption of media products considerably affects the level of travel motivation of viewers, as in the case of Korean TV dramas (Chang, 2015; Ng & Chan, 2020). Hence, it is postulated that:

H_{2b}. Thai yaoi media consumption significantly influences travel motivation.

Media products that portray romance (Riley & van Doren, 1992) motivate audiences to visit a destination (O'Neill et al., 2005). Media products are consumed by viewers because they can relive the emotions they have felt in a film, such as in TV dramas (Beeton, 2010). The level of influence of media products on viewers' motivation to visit a place largely depends on their emotional connection to these films (Kim, 2012). Despite the fact that the viewers have the capacity to differentiate fiction and nonfiction in media products, films, such as TV dramas, allow audiences to momentarily escape into fantasy and nostalgia, and re-experience another dimension of their loved films (Kim, 2012; Lin & Tong, 2009).

There are specific film tourists, or those who seek destinations that they have seen in TV dramas, who travel to places to attain self-actualization or to relive the TV dramas' fantasy or romance (Beeton, 2010; Ryan et al., 2009). When specific film tourists visit the featured destination in a TV drama, they show attachment with the

program by taking photos of shooting locations and re-enacting the performances of the characters. All these experiences are considered by these tourists as personal (Kim, 2010). Thus, it is hypothesized that:

> *H_3. Emotional involvement significantly influences travel motivation.*

The popularity of Thai *yaoi* culture among Filipino audiences (Carreon, 2020) is evident with the number of Thai BL series available in online stream applications in the Philippines (Smith, 2020). The attention given by the Filipino viewers to Thai BL series is significantly increasing. Thai *yaoi* media consumption is seen to influence Filipino travel motivation because of the plot and characters (Chang 2015; Vila et al., 2021) of Thai BL series. It can be noted that TV drama viewers may form deeper connections to the series itself (Chang 2015; Kim & Long, 2012). Furthermore, it has been established that media consumption may affect the emotional involvement of TV drama series viewers. Parasocial theory establishes this relationship (Giles, 2002).

Due to the possible bond between viewers and TV drama characters (Kim & Kim, 2017; Kim & Kim, 2018), emotional involvement may affect audiences' travel motivation. The emotions and the emotional connection developed between the viewer and the TV drama may induce these individuals to visit a destination (Kim, 2012). The experience of reliving the performance of the characters of a TV drama, or simply photographing the shooting location of a film induces viewers to visit a destination (Kim, 2010). Consequently, the present study addresses the gap on how emotional involvement may act as a mediator on the link between Thai *yaoi* media consumption and travel motivation. Hence, it is postulated that:

> *H_4. Emotional involvement mediates the relationship between Thai yaoi media consumption and travel motivation.*

Based on the theoretical underpinnings and the postulated hypotheses, the conceptual framework of the present study is established (see Figure 1). In the conceptual framework, the study examines how cultural proximity measured in three dimensions – geographic, values, and collectivism – influences Thai *yaoi* media

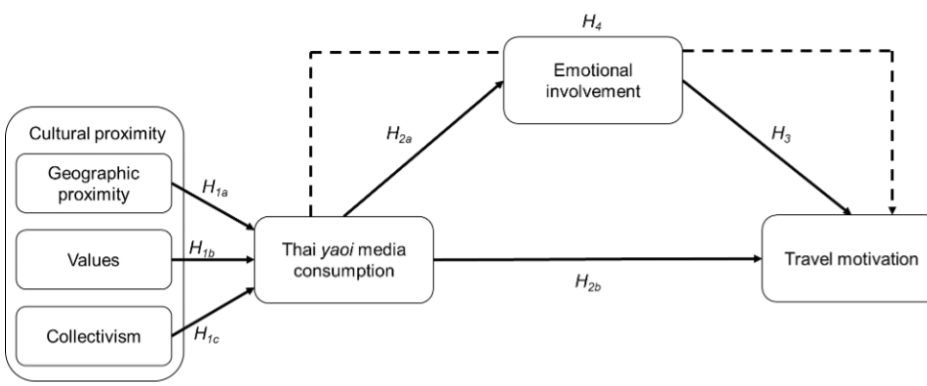

Table 1. Conceptual framework (own compilation)

consumption (H_{1a}, H_{1b}, and H_{1c}). It also explores how Thai *yaoi* media consumption affects travel motivation (H_{2b}) and emotional involvement (H_{2a}). Furthermore, emotional involvement was also tested on how it affects travel motivation (H_3). Finally, it scrutinizes the intervening effect of emotional involvement on the relationship between Thai *yaoi* media consumption and travel motivation (H_4).

METHODS

Respondents of the Study

Since the present study examines Thai *yaoi* media consumption and its impact on travel motivations of Filipino viewers of Thai BL series, the participants were identified using a snowball sampling technique. The respondents were Filipino viewers and fans of Thai BL series. In the data collection phase, Google Forms was used. The respondents were recruited through referral since the population is unknown. The online survey questionnaire was posted in social media and initial respondents were asked to identify other potential participants. Moreover, initial participants likewise referred BL fan groups where the online survey can be posted. Several Philippines-based, fan-made Facebook groups supporting Thai BL series and Thai BL series actors were asked permission to post the self-administered online survey in their respective online groups. Four Thai BL series Facebook groups (with approximately 19,000 to 83,000 members) responded positively to the request. Out of 525 retrieved responses, 494 adequately answered all required items in the instrument, a completion rate of 94%.

The online survey contains the consent form where information about the aim of study, the potential risks and hazards associated with the undertaking, the duration of the respondent's participation, contact details and information about myself as the researcher and my institutional affiliation, and a statement of voluntary participation in the study. Moreover, an ethical clearance was secured from the ethics review committee of my affiliated higher education institution.

The online dissemination of the instrument started on August 1, 2020 and ended on August 20, 2020. To measure whether the sample size is sufficient to support the results of the hypothesis testing, inverse square root and Gamma-exponential methods (Kock & Hadaya, 2018) were applied. Using a minimum absolute beta coefficient of 0.129, significant level of 0.05, and power level of 0.80, the minimum sample size based on inverse square root method is 372, while the Gamma-exponential method reflected minimum sample size of 358. Hence, the sample size of 494 is robust enough to support the results of the hypothesis testing.

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the respondents. Out of 494 respondents, 29.8% were heterosexual female, 27.5% were gays, 24.1% were bisexuals, 6.9% were heterosexual male, 0.8% were transgenders, 0.6% were lesbians, 8.1% prefer not to say, and 2.2% were classified as others. In terms of age, more than half of the total participants were in the age group 18 to 20 (53.8%) and 21 to 25 (26.9%) years old. They were also asked regarding the number of Thai BL series they have watched, and 72.7% of the total respondents watched at least 10 Thai *yaoi* series. The findings also show that 53.4% started watching Thai BL series in 2020 and video-sharing platforms such as YouTube and Dailymotion were the most frequently used mode for accessing the said series.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS	N	%
Sexual orientation / Gender identity		
Heterosexual male	34	6.9
Heterosexual female	147	29.8
Lesbian	3	.6
Gay	136	27.5
Bisexual	119	24.1
Transgender	4	.8
Prefer Not to Say	40	8.1
Others	11	2.2
Age		
18 – 20	266	53.8
21 – 25	133	26.9
26 – 30	61	12.3
31 – 35	21	4.3
36 – above	13	2.6
Number of Thai BL series watched		
1 – 3	37	7.5
4 – 6	49	9.9
7 – 9	49	9.9
More than 9	359	72.7
Year started watching Thai BL series		
2013 – 2015	34	6.9
2016	41	8.3
2017	44	8.9
2018	52	10.5
2019	59	11.9
2020	264	53.4
Most frequently used mode of watching Thai BL Series		
Video-sharing platform (e.g., YouTube, Dailymotion)	372	75.3
Paid streaming services (e.g., Netflix, Viu)	23	4.7
Local streaming services (e.g., IwantTFC)	11	2.2
Online sites / blogs	24	4.9
Social media sites (e.g., Facebook pages, groups)	62	12.6
Others	2	.4

Table 1. Respondents' characteristics (own compilation)

Research Instrument and Measures

The research instrument used in the study was an online survey via Google Forms. The said instrument was divided into two major parts – the characteristics and profile of the respondents (see Table 1) and the constructs used in the study.

As for the constructs utilized in the study, Thai *yaoi* media consumption was measured using five dimensions, namely: a) love without gender and pro-gay attitude (4 items); b) identification/self-analysis (3 items); c) melodramatic/emotional elements (3 items); d) arts and aesthetics (3 items); and e) pure entertainment (3 items).

This construct and its dimensions were adopted from the study of Zsila et al. (2018).

Cultural proximity was gauged using three aspects, namely: a) geographic (3 items); b) values (4 items); and c) collectivism (4 items). This construct with the three dimensions was adopted from the study of Su et al. (2011). On the other hand, emotional involvement was measured using six items that were taken from the research of Kim and Kim (2017). For travel motivation, eight items were adopted from the work of Li and Cai (2012), and these items were refined in the study of Chang (2015).

All items in all the constructs used in the study were measured using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 means *strongly disagree* and 5 means *strongly agree*. A 5-point Likert scale was used in the present study as this is less confusing, it increases response rate (Babakus & Mangold, 1992; Devlin et al., 1993), and results in better data quality especially for agree-disagreement scales (Revilla et al., 2014).

DATA ANALYSIS

The study employed a prediction approach to examine the direct and indirect relationships identified in the hypotheses. Moreover, partial least squares (PLS) path modelling using WarpPLS 7.0 (Kock, 2020) was used as the statistical approach. This technique is appropriate in the study because the research involves the measurement of the direct and mediating effects, includes first-order and higher-order constructs, and gauges reflective and formative variables (Hair et al., 2019).

Results

The present study utilized PLS path modelling to measure the hypothesized relationships. In PLS path modelling, the first phase is to evaluate the measurement model, also called the outer model analysis. The second phase is to evaluate the structural model, also called the inner model analysis (Hair et al., 2019).

Measurement Model Evaluation

The first stage of PLS path modeling is the evaluation of the validity and reliability of the constructs used in the present study. Table 2 presents the results of the reliability of the constructs using composite reliability. To say that the constructs exhibit internal consistency, the composite reliability should be equal to or higher than 0.70 (Kock, 2014). As shown in Table 2, all latent constructs have composite reliability coefficients of more than 0.70; hence, they exhibit internal consistency.

Part of the assessment of construct validity is convergent validity. Item loadings and average variance extracted (AVEs) were assessed to measure the convergent validity of the first-order reflective constructs. According to Kock (2014), to say that a latent variable exhibits convergent validity, each item loading must have a value of at least 0.50 and each factor loading must be significant ($p > 0.05$). Moreover, each latent construct must possess AVE equal to or higher than 0.50. As shown in Table 2, all first-order reflective constructs possess convergent validity.

CONSTRUCT / ITEM (Reflective – First Order)	Item loading
THAI *YAOI* MEDIA CONSUMPTION	
I watch Thai Boys' Love Series because…	
***Love Without Gender & Pro-gay Attitude* – AVE = 0.531; CR = 0.819**	
…there are no gender differences in it.	0.762
…feelings have priority over gender in it.	0.662
…gay men have equal rights in it.	0.786
…this genre portrays a positive picture of gay men.	0.698
***Identification/ Self-Analysis* – AVE = 0.753; CR = 0.901**	
…it helps me better understand my life events.	0.841
… it gives me an opportunity to better understand my feelings.	0.885
… it provides me with a guide to better understand my sexual dilemmas.	0.877
***Melodramatic/ Emotional Elements* – AVE = 0.641; CR = 0.843**	
…it portrays intense feelings.	0.768
… it has a stronger emotional impact on me than other stories.	0.813
… it evokes deep emotions in me.	0.821
***Arts and Aesthetics* – AVE = 0.552; CR = 0.787**	
… it as an aesthetic appeal.	0.747
… erotica is artistically portrayed in it.	0.772
… I like its graphics.	0.708
***Pure Entertainment* – AVE = 0.689; CR = 0.869**	
… it is entertaining.	0.815
… it fills my free time.	0.842
… it is relaxing to me.	0.832
CULTURAL PROXIMITY	
***Geographic Proximity* – AVE = 0.696; CR = 0.872**	
Thailand is geographically not far away from the Philippines.	0.758
The convenient transportation makes it easy to travel to Thailand.	0.862
The geographical proximity makes it easy to travel to Thailand.	0.877
***Values* – AVE = 0.654; CR = 0.883**	
Thais' attitudes toward family values are similar to those of the Philippines	0.780
Thais' attitudes toward cultural traditions are similar to those of the Filipinos.	0.742
Thais' attitude toward filial piety (respect to parents, elders) is similar to that of the Filipinos.	0.865
Thais' attitude toward the elderly is similar to that of the Filipinos.	0.843
***Collectivism* – AVE = 0.589; CR = 0.850**	
Thais' attitude toward the member of groups is similar of that of the Filipinos.	0.779
Thais' attitude toward the individual and society is similar to that of the Filipinos	0.853
Thais' attitude toward harmony within a group is similar to that of the Filipinos.	0.595
Thais' attitude toward interpersonal conflict is similar to that of the Filipinos.	0.817
EMOTIONAL INVOLVEMENT – AVE = 0.571; CR = 0.888	
I feel that Thai BL series and my favorite character(s) /actor(s) keep me company.	0.822
I like hearing the voice(s) of my favorite character(s)/actor(s).	0.795
I feel comfortable when watching Thai BL series as if the character(s)/actor(s) were my friends.	0.743
I really miss Thai BL series and my favorite character(s)/actor(s) whenever I am unable to watch them.	0.725
My favorite characters/actors in Thai BL series are like old friends.	0.732
When watching Thai BL series, I feel that I am a part of the story.	0.710
TRAVEL MOTIVATION – AVE = 0.505; CR = 0.890	
After watching Thai BL series, I plan to visit Thailand…	
To let others know that I have been to the place(s) shown in the series.	0.628
To taste authentic Thai food.	0.572
To visit a Thai destination that many people are talking about.	0.626
To help fantasize myself being a part of the BL series.	0.735
To experience the location(s) appeared in the series.	0.767
To see the scenery and landscape shown in Thai BL series in real life.	0.789
To feel the romance and emotions represented by the character(s)/actor(s) in the BL series.	0.770
To relive the storyline of my favorite BL series.	0.766

Notes: All item loadings are significant, $p < .05$. AVE-average variance extracted; CR-composite reliability.

Table 2. Convergent validity and reliability of first-order reflective constructs (own compilation)

Discriminant validity using the Fornell-Larcker criterion was gauged by identifying the correlations among latent variables and square roots of AVEs as shown by the diagonal values (highlighted coefficients) in Table 3. When the diagonal values are greater than the off-diagonal coefficients, constructs are said to exhibit discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Based on the results in Table 3, all latent constructs passed the discriminant validity test.

	LW	SA	MELO	AA	PE	GP	VAL	COL	EI	TM
LW	**0.729**									
SA	0.405	**0.868**								
MELO	0.446	0.496	**0.801**							
AA	0.325	0.287	0.439	**0.743**						
PE	0.411	0.318	0.459	0.442	**0.830**					
GP	0.308	0.199	0.275	0.215	0.323	**0.834**				
VAL	0.306	0.206	0.218	0.204	0.298	0.327	**0.809**			
COL	0.262	0.224	0.181	0.266	0.269	0.204	0.571	**0.768**		
EI	0.459	0.455	0.500	0.473	0.507	0.246	0.258	0.258	**0.756**	
TM	0.309	0.337	0.347	0.439	0.380	0.168	0.210	0.286	0.579	**0.711**

Notes: LW-love without gender & pro-gay attitude; SA-identification/self-analysis; MELO-melodramatic/emotional elements; AA-arts and aesthetics; PE-pure entertainment; GP-geographic proximity; VAL-values; COL-collectivism; EI-emotional involvement; TM-travel motivation.

Table 3. Discriminant validity test of first-order reflective constructs using Fornell-Larcker criterion (own compilation)

Discriminant validity was also identified by gauging the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations. To say that the reflective constructs exhibit discriminant validity, the HTMT ratio of correlations in Table 4 must be lower than 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015). The results in Table 4 confirm that the latent constructs in the present study possess discriminant validity.

	LW	SA	MELO	AA	PE	GP	VAL	COL	EI	TM
LW										
SA	0.526									
MELO	0.628	0.638								
AA	0.500	0.408	0.647							
PE	0.560	0.396	0.616	0.655						
GP	0.416	0.247	0.368	0.313	0.419					
VAL	0.408	0.250	0.283	0.294	0.372	0.406				
COL	0.361	0.281	0.242	0.398	0.354	0.263	0.722			
EI	0.590	0.541	0.640	0.670	0.622	0.304	0.310	0.324		
TM	0.389	0.392	0.434	0.609	0.462	0.211	0.256	0.360	0.669	

Notes: LW-love without gender & pro-gay attitude; SA-identification/self-analysis; MELO-melodramatic/emotional elements; AA-arts and aesthetics; PE-pure entertainment; GP-geographic proximity; VAL-values; COL-collectivism; EI-emotional involvement; TM-travel motivation.

Table 4. Discriminant validity test of first-order reflective constructs using HTMT ratios (own compilation)

In the present study, Thai *yaoi* media consumption as a variable was treated as a higher-order construct. Using a disjoint two-stage approach (Becker et al., 2012), Thai *yaoi* media consumption (formative) was evaluated with the following dimensions: love without gender and pro-gay attitude; identification or self-analysis; melodramatic or emotional elements; arts and aesthetics; and pure entertainment. The measurement model assessment of a higher-order construct includes scrutiny of weights of the indicators and their corresponding p-values, variance inflation factors (VIFs), and full-collinearity VIF.

The collinearity test was performed by assessing all indicator weights. The five dimensions of Thai *yaoi* media consumption must be significant, meaning the p-value of each indicator must be < .05 (Ramayah et al., 2018). Moreover, the VIF of each indicator must satisfy the threshold of 3.30 (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006). Based on the results in Table 5, all indicators of Thai *yaoi* media consumption are within the acceptable thresholds for indicator weights and significance, and VIFs.

Full collinearity VIF for the higher-order construct Thai *yaoi* media consumption was also evaluated to measure its discriminant validity (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). To say that the higher-order construct has discriminant validity, full collinearity VIF coefficient must be at most 3.30 (Kock, 2015). Based on the results, the full collinearity VIF of Thai *yaoi* media consumption is equal to 2.070; hence, this higher-order construct exhibits discriminant validity.

Higher Order Construct	Indicator weight	*p*	VIF	Full collinearity VIF
Thai *Yaoi* media consumption				
Love Without Gender & Pro-gay Attitude	0.273	<0.001	1.412	2.070
Identification/ Self-Analysis	0.263	<0.001	1.412	
Melodramatic/ Emotional Elements	0.305	<0.001	1.695	
Arts and Aesthetics	0.260	<0.001	1.376	
Pure Entertainment	0.278	<0.001	1.470	

Table 5. Measurement model assessment of the formative higher order construct (own compilation)

Structural Model Evaluation

The evaluation of a structural model, as shown in Figure 2 and Table 6, involves the assessment of the path coefficients of the hypothesized relationships. Analysis of the data shows that the dimensions of cultural proximity – geographic proximity (β = 0.269, p < 0.001), values (β = 0.129, p = 0.002), and collectivism (β = 0.219, p < 0.001) – significantly and positively influence Thai *yaoi* media consumption with small effect sizes (GP → YAOI: f^2 = 0.102; VAL → YAOI: f^2 = 0.046; COLLECT → YAOI: f^2 = 0.081). Therefore, H1a, H1b, and H1c are supported.

The results also reveal that the higher-order construct Thai *yaoi* media consumption is significantly and positively related to emotional involvement (β = 0.665, p < 0.001) and to travel motivation (β = 0.216, p < 0.001). Additionally, the findings show that YAOI → EI exhibits large effect size (f^2 = 0.443) and small effect size for YAOI → TM (f^2 = 0.108). Hence, H2a and H2b are supported.

The influence of emotional involvement on travel motivation was also evaluated, and the result indicates that EI and TM are significantly and positively related ($\beta = 0.440$, $p < 0.001$) with a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.255$). Therefore, H3 is supported.

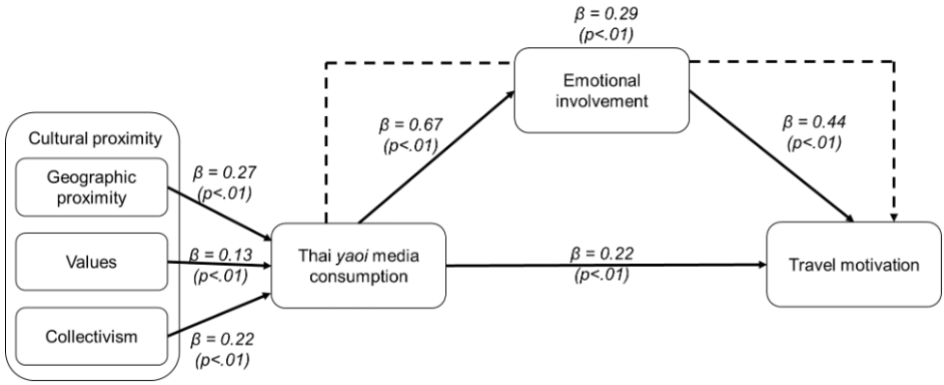

Figure 2. Structural model and the corresponding beta coefficients (own compilation)

The mediation analysis shows that emotional involvement indirectly affects the relationship between Thai *yaoi* media consumption and travel motivation ($\beta = 0.293$, $p < 0.001$) with a small effect size ($f^2 = 0.147$). This signifies that Thai *yaoi* media consumption significantly affects emotional involvement, which, in turn, influences travel motivation. Therefore, H4 is supported.

Hypothesis	Path coefficient	*p*	*SE*	Effect size	Decision
Direct effects					
H_{1a}. GP ⇙ YAOI	0.269	<0.001	0.044	0.102	Supported
H_{1b}. VAL ⇙ YAOI	0.129	0.002	0.044	0.046	Supported
H_{1c}. COLLECT ⇙ YAOI	0.219	<0.001	0.044	0.081	Supported
H_{2a}. YAOI ⇙ EI	0.665	<0.001	0.041	0.443	Supported
H_{2b}. YAOI ⇙ TM	0.216	<0.001	0.044	0.108	Supported
H_3. EI ⇙ TM	0.440	<0.001	0.043	0.255	Supported
Indirect effect					
H_4. YAOI ⇙ EI ⇙ TM	0.293	<0.001	0.031	0.147	Supported

Notes: Effect sizes follows Cohen's (1988) criterion: 0.02 = small, 0.15 = medium, 0.35 = large. SE = standard error; β = standardized path coefficient. GP-geographic proximity; VAL-values; COLLECT-collectivism; YAOI- Thai yaoi media consumption; EI-emotional involvement; TM-travel motivation.

Table 6. Direct and mediating effects (own compilation)

Predictive relevance using the Stone-Geisser Q^2 test and the coefficient of determination or R^2 were also gauged as part of the assessment of the structural model. The coefficient of Q^2 must be greater than zero to say that the structural model adequately predicts each endogenous latent variable's indicators (Kock, 2020). The Q^2 coefficients of 0.443 (emotional involvement), 0.364 (travel motivation), and 0.227 (Thai *yaoi* media consumption) reflect substantial predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2017); thus, the model passed the predictive relevance test.

As for the coefficient of determination, an R^2 value of < .02 shows that the effect is too weak to be included as vital from a practical point of view (Kock, 2014). The R^2 coefficients of 0.443 (emotional involvement), 0.364 (travel motivation), and 0.228 (Thai *yaoi* media consumption) reflect weak to moderate prediction effects (Chin, 1998).

To check whether lateral and vertical collinearities exist in the model, a common method bias test was performed (Kock & Gaskin, 2014). In the test of common method bias, full collinearity VIF of each construct must not exceed to 3.30 (Kock, 2015). As shown in Table 7, all latent constructs in the study passed this requirement.

Construct	Full collinearity VIF	R^2	Q^2
Geographic proximity	1.222		
Values	1.621		
Collectivism	1.566		
Emotional involvement	2.087	0.443	0.443
Travel motivation	1.595	0.364	0.364
Thai *yaoi* media consumption	2.070	0.228	0.227

Table 7. Common method bias test, R^2, and Q^2 (own compilation)

DISCUSSION

The present study showcases interesting results. First all dimensions of cultural proximity – geographic, values, and collectivism – were found to significantly and positively influence Thai *yaoi* media consumption. The result indicates that Filipino viewers find Thailand as a country that is geographically near to the Philippines; therefore, Filipino viewers find it easy to travel to Thailand. Moreover, the findings also suggest that the Filipino audience of Thai BL series finds similarities in terms of Thais' attitude toward family values, traditions, members of the group, society, and interpersonal conflict. Therefore, when Filipino viewers consume Thai BL series, they see similarities in cultural backgrounds between the Philippines and Thailand. Looking at the cultural proximity theory, the study confirms that consumption of media products is related to the proximity that viewers experience when it comes to cultural background shown in a TV drama (Lu et al., 2019). Anh (2016) even contended that cultural proximity is a vital factor in why viewers consume TV dramas of other nations.

Second, the study also found that Thai *yaoi* media consumption significantly and directly affects emotional involvement. This result suggests that consumption of Thai BL series leads to connections between the viewers and the characters and story of a TV drama. The *yaoi* phenomenon is an important aspect of the pop culture of Thailand today. Thai BL series are TV dramas that do not only portray homoerotic and romantic love between two men (Babal, 2019), but also incorporate positive attitude towards gay and gay relationships and allow viewers to better understand themselves and the society in general (Zsila et al., 2018). Aside from the entertainment value and aesthetic appeal of most Thai *yaoi* media, Thai BL series permit viewers to see sexual dilemmas in a better perspective. Hence, when viewers consume Thai BL series, the emotional connections with the characters and drama itself (Connell, 2005) are evident. This is also aligned with parasocial theory and past studies that indicate that TV

dramas evoke emotional connection between the viewers and the characters of the media products (Chang, 2015; Liu & Pratt, 2019).

Third, the results of the study also revealed that Thai *yaoi* media consumption and travel motivation are significantly and positively related. This finding suggests that the exposure of Filipino viewers on Thai BL series affects their decision to travel to a particular destination. As viewers watch more Thai BL series, they become more attracted and have better motives to visit the location featured in a Thai BL series, or to visit Thailand as a tourism destination. This is in consonance with the findings of past studies that argued that TV dramas provide an avenue for viewers to experience a destination, which, in turn, induces them to visit the place (Beeton, 2010; Zeng et al., 2015). It was also noted that TV dramas are powerful devices to arouse the viewers to travel (Iwashita, 2008).

Fourth, emotional involvement was found to be significantly and positively related to travel motivation. This finding means that the exposure of viewers to the plot and characters of Thai BL series augments the level of motivation of the viewers to visit a destination. Chang (2015) and Kim and Long (2012) even maintained that travel behavior of viewers is shaped by several factors including their exposure to TV drama series. TV dramas allow audiences to be deeply and emotionally involved with the characters and the series itself, increasing their intimacy with the TV drama (Chang, 2015; Vila et al., 2021).

Lastly, emotional involvement was found to mediate the link between Thai *yaoi* media consumption and travel motivation. This result signifies that emotional involvement strengthens the relationship between Thai *yaoi* media consumption and travel motivation. In short, Thai *yaoi* media consumption influences emotional involvement, which, in turn, affects travel motivation. With the popularity of Thai *yaoi* culture among Filipino viewers (Carreon, 2020), travel motivation among Filipino viewers to visit Thailand is heightened. This increased level of travel motivation among Filipino viewers is affected by their emotional connection with the characters and the Thai BL series they have watched. Since emotional involvement allows viewers to establish deep connections with the characters or plot of a TV drama, audiences become motivated to relive the experience they have felt from the program they have watched, in this case, the Thai BL series.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The current study highlights how pop culture can be an instrument to attract film tourists and presents how a pop-cultural product of one country can be a source of competitive advantage of another nation, as in the case of Thai *yaoi* culture. It has been noted that the *yaoi* phenomenon started in Japan (Mizoguchi, 2003; Zsila et al., 2018), and now Thailand has embraced this boys' love phenomenon and became part of its pop culture. This cultural extension is evident in Thai *yaoi* films (TV dramas and movies) and now favorably affects Thailand as a tourism destination. The presence of Thai *yaoi* fandoms and Thai pop cultural products (e.g., Thai celebrities and artists, *lakorn*, and Thai BL series) in several countries (Baudinette, 2019; Carreon, 2020; Koaysomboon, 2020; Yukari, 2020; Yuqiao, 2020) is a manifestation of Thai pop-cultural success.

The explosion of Korean wave or *Hallyu* is a clear evidence that pop culture is a powerful travel motivation tool. Many of the studies in the past only examine Korean pop culture in relation to travel motivation (Chang, 2015; Gong & Tung, 2017; Kim et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2012; Rittichainuwat & Rattanaphinanchai, 2015). The present study provides a novel direction by exploring the context of Thai pop culture, particularly of Thai *yaoi* culture, and its link to travel motivation. It is interesting to highlight that Thai pop culture, especially Thai BL series, is getting the attention of a wider market outside Thailand. More and more viewers, especially in the Philippines, are now embracing the Thai *yaoi* culture through consumption of Thai BL series (Carreon, 2020). Hence, the research at hand offers significant implications. One of the relevant implications of the present study is that the exploration of Thai *yaoi* culture in the context of film tourism addresses the gap in the literature. Many of the past studies related to film-induced tourism focus on dramas or movies with male-female lead roles. As with Thai BL series, where male-male leads are the primary emphasis of the story, the current undertaking fills the underexplored areas in film tourism scholarship.

Cultural proximity is an important factor when it comes to media consumption. In the present study, the cultural proximity of Thailand and the Philippines affects Thai *yaoi* media consumption of the Filipino viewers. Similarities of the two mentioned countries in terms of geography, values, and the concept of collectivism are reasons why Filipino viewers consume Thai *yaoi* media, particularly Thai BL series. Additionally, the emotional connection that is formed between Filipino viewers and the Thai BL series and its characters induces the audience to visit Thailand. From this, it can be argued that devices such as the use of cultural factors and emotions are important aspects that need to be considered when utilizing TV dramas to motivate people to visit a destination. Thus, the study implies that film tourism practitioners, such as film producers and tourism marketers, may work collaboratively to come up with relevant strategies in promoting a destination through films. Film makers and tourism practitioners may take advantage of the popularity of *yaoi* culture in producing film products that center on romances between men while highlighting tourism destinations. The acceptance of viewers to *yaoi* media products and the rise of fandoms of BL actors are indictors of massive successes of the BL genre as a unique selling point in the entertainment industry.

Yaoi media products appeal not only to the LGBT community, but also to young women (Babal, 2019; Watson & Jirik, 2018). This is also true to the Filipino followers of Thai BL series (Carreon, 2020). The present study proves that Thai *yaoi* media products, such as Thai BL series, have a huge potential to attract travelers to visit Thailand. Film-induced tourists, who seek to relive the experience they have felt from the Thai *yaoi* dramas they have watched and to have the opportunity to personally be involved in Thai culture, location, and destinations, show that Thai *yaoi* media consumption can greatly influence their decision to visit Thailand. Therefore, mainstreaming the *yaoi* genre in TV dramas, or any other media products, may positively affect travel motivation of viewers. Though considered a niche market, the LGBT community and young women's acceptance of Thai *yaoi* media can be a source of competitive advantage to Thailand's tourism sector.

The present study offers new insights about media consumption and its relation to travel motivation. Film-induced tourism studies focusing on Thai pop culture are considered underexplored, or to large extent, unexplored. The present study is possibly the first study to investigate media consumption and travel motivation in the context of the Thai pop culture of boys' love series. Moreover, it is also the first study to test the relationship between Thai *yaoi* media consumption and travel motivation with Filipino viewers as respondents. Interestingly, even though the Philippines is known to be a gay-friendly country (Manalastas et al., 2017), media contents portraying male-to-male relationships are limited. One of the primary reasons for this is that most Filipinos are Catholics, and homosexuality is considered a sin. With the limited media content on male-to-male relationships, the younger Filipino viewers today embrace pop cultural products such as the Thai BL series. Thus, the present study offers a way of looking at film-induced tourism, where male-to-male relationship media contents result in travel motivation, which drives tourism.

LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Though it offers novel findings, the present research also has limitations. Given that the respondents were Filipino viewers, and they were selected non-randomly, it may yield different results if this study were tested in different contexts and if a random sampling technique was employed. Second, Thai BL series are considered a new genre to Filipino audience. Therefore, future researchers may find interest in exploring *yaoi* media consumption and travel motivation in a different Asian context to confirm or to negate the claims of the present study. Moreover, other researchers may also investigate comparison between Filipino viewers of *lakorn*, where the leads are usually male and female actors, and of Thai BL series, in relation to travel motivation. The results may offer another new insight into how Filipino viewers perceive both *lakorn* and Thai BL series in relation to travel motivation. Third, since the online survey was distributed to select online Thai BL series Facebook fan groups, this may pose a limitation due to their stronger opinions on the topic of the present study. Hence, it is recommended that future researchers may expand the current research by including a broader set of participants. Fourth, most of the respondents were from the LGBT community. It would be interesting to recommend to future researchers to explore how *yaoi* media consumption and travel motivation differ between heterosexual and non-heterosexual participants. And fifth, since the present study utilized predictive research design, other researchers may conduct similar studies using other designs, such as qualitative or mixed methods.

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Mobilizing the (Im)Mobile Museum Through Hybrid Curation: A Story of Hybrid Curation of Cultural Practice During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This narrative research report summarizes the experiences of Vivid Ethnicity, a mobile anthropological museum of the Museum of Cultural Anthropology at Mahidol University, Thailand, during the lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2022. Although Vivid Ethnicity was rendered immobile and forced to stop travelling during the pandemic, it developed a hybrid curatorial method to stay connected and engaged with its audiences and research partners in two ethnic villages in Chiang Mai province. A key lesson of this experience is that hands-on information and communication technologies can help maintain a certain proximity with the audiences and research partners in times of physical absence. We also learned that an empathetic mindset on the part of everyone involved in the project, along with a human-centric design, are crucial components of what we call the hybrid curation of cultural practice.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic; Good Health; Hybrid Curatorial Practice; Mobile Ethnography; Mobile Museum

COVID-19 IN THAILAND AND NARRATIVE RESEARCH

Thailand was the first country after China to report a confirmed COVID-19 case, on 12 January 2020 (The National Economic and Social Development Council, 2022). The Thai government announced a lockdown in March 2020. This had a significant impact on the economy and resulted in widespread job losses and economic hardship, particularly for low-wage workers and small businesses. From a macro-view, the Bank of Thailand forecasted that the largest contraction would be 8.1% in 2020. The Thai economy was already slowing, with growth dropping from 4.2% in 2018 to 2.4% in 2019. The International Labour Organisation estimated that as many as 3.7 million people (including the informal sector) would

be unemployed by the second quarter of 2020.[1] The hospitality and service sectors, such as hotels, wellness spas, restaurants, and entertainment facilities were hit particularly hard. Estimates of the impact saw tourism revenue fall by 70% in 2020. More than 50% of those employed in tourism were informal, with over 70% of tourism employment being in the food and beverage subsector. This subsector was hit particularly badly due to closures (The National Economic and Social Development Council, 2022). This macro-view matched the micro-outlook witnessed in the field of our work – Ecomuseum Doi Si Than in Phrao District, Chiang Mai. In our case, more than 10 employees had to go back to their hometown because of unemployment, fear of COVID-19, and the lockdowns.

This report is an effort to tell the story of the mobile museum Vivid Ethnicity and to answer two questions: How did Vivid Ethnicity operate during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what role did ICT play in keeping us – the researchers – connected with people in remote areas who used to work with us onsite? Creswell (2018) describes narrative research as a qualitative research approach focusing on telling the story of individual experience. Under this definition, this account is a story constructed by the researchers as well as an example of auto-ethnography and mobile ethnography. Muskat et al. (2017) explain that mobile ethnography is a means of conducting research by using a mobile device to collect data. Mobile ethnography allows the capture and exploration of mobilities as well as the interpretation of boundaries in less dynamic settings.

Vivid Ethnicity was designed to serve as a platform for cultural transformation, which is cultural transmission that modifies or changes cultural practice along with contemporary society. It started to operate in late 2019 and continues until today. For almost two years, Vivid Ethnicity had been planning a long trip to the north of Thailand in December 2020 and January 2021. But everything was put on a hold as the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand started in January 2020 and its peak came during the second wave, which led to a second lockdown in December 2020. Although Vivid Ethnicity had been rendered immobile, multiple other projects had to continue. We hence decided to investigate solutions based on information and communication technologies (ICT) for working with the Karen and Lua ethnic groups 'in' their communities.

This report narrates our experiences with ICT in curating cultural practice. By presenting the lessons we learned, we aim to open a space for a broader discussion around our and similar human-centric approaches.

VIVID ETHNICITY

Vivid Ethnicity, a special mobile exhibition, travels around all regions in Thailand to promote the key message of cultural diversity, understanding, and respect through creative conversation[2] and hands-on activities. Our target groups are students at schools and universities, and in local communities. The aim of Vivid Ethnicity is to initiate critical and creative thinking through multiple sensory media, such as an ethnic food cooking workshop, a dripping coffee workshop, an ethnic accessories and costume

1 Thailand's workforce in 2019 was 37.6 million.

2 Creative conversation here denotes non-hateful speech, free of bullying and discrimination.

Figure 1. Vivid Ethnicity outside and inside. *Pictures of the Vivid Ethnicity mobile exhibition containing mundane life objects, hands-on activities, educational programs, books, a museum shop, and a coffee shop*. (photo by the authors).

workshop and drawing (Yamabhai et al., 2021). Vivid Ethnicity exhibits mundane life objects donated from ethnic groups in Thailand. Ethnic group members play an important role in co-curating and co-creating the exhibition. The exhibition is presented in a caravan characterized by a cozy living room-like atmosphere. There are both printed and electronic books specializing on the ethnic groups of Thailand. Visitors are invited to handle the objects as social objects[3] (Simon, 2010). As curators and researchers, we encourage visitors to share their experiences with the objects through conversations. The exhibition usually becomes quite lively and allows the audiences to construct their own meaning through conversation and hands-on experience.

The exhibition also comprises a museum shop and a coffee shop, which exhibits materials and products collected during our fieldwork research, mostly in ethnic villages such as Karen and Lua/Lawa. All products offered at the museum shop come from the ethnic communities we have been engaging with over the years. Hence, Vivid Ethnicity acts as a platform, creating a meeting point between various ethnic groups and the public. Generally, Vivid Ethnicity is very flexible in its way of displaying cultural objects and activities. It can curate new stories, exhibitions, educational programs, and activities to suit the audience and place, depending on where the exhibition is traveling to, and the events planned in situ.

VIVID ETHNICITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

The containment and mitigation measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic also resulted in the cessation of the mobile exhibition activities. Thus, we had to explore other channels to engage with our audiences. During the pandemic, the

3 According to Simon (2010, pp. 129-133), social objects are objects that provoke a good conversation between two persons and allow for sharing experiences.

Thai government, through the Ministry of Public Health, created the so called DMHTT procedure – **d**istancing, **m**ask wearing, **h**and washing, **t**esting, and ***Thai cha na***, the medical online COVID-19 registration and information system (Bureau of Mental Health Service Administration, 2021). Government institutions campaigned and advertised for the public to follow the DMHTT rules (Department of Disease Control, 2021; The Red Cross Society, 2021). As the DMHTT acronym became omnipresent, we decided to use it for a new curatorial practice. We created the so-called DMHTT service innovation for our Vivid Ethnicity mobile exhibition. Here, **D** stands for ***d****rive-through*, M for ***m****useum-ness*, **H** for ***h****appiness*, **T** for ***t****oy* or ***t****runk*, and the second **T** for ***t****akeaway*.

Our DMHTT service innovation offers a 'vivid' box that consists of a story book about ethnic groups created by our volunteers, a teddy bear with a D-I-Y ethnic dress (the audience can choose the size of the bear), ethnic coffee or ethnic popcorn (the audience can choose either), and a Facebook Messenger channel for the visitors to share their experiences with ethnic groups with us. The vivid box is provided to anyone at the Vivid Ethnicity booth situated at Mahidol University: People can **d**rive through (**D**) and enjoy **m**useum-ness (**M**) with **h**appiness (**H**) by getting the box as a toy (**T**) to **t**ake away (**T**) and play with at home. If the audience is not able to drive through, the vivid box can also be mailed to them. Through this service, we tried to create an authentic experience that enables people to learn about ethnic groups in Thailand through action, smell, touch, and even taste. We used the idea of multiple sensory activities to allow the audience to learn about ethnic groups at different experiential levels. One example of the feedback we received is:

> Who knew that museum-ness can be delivered at home! My kids were so excited to receive a vivid box and be able to learn more about Karen, Lawa, Hmong, Black Thai, Lisu. We got the ethnic popcorn to taste the essence of ethnic group. My kid asked why don't we get the pork or chicken from the story telling book included in the box. We also got the teddy bear with a D-I-Y costume challenging our hands-on skills, let's try it! (a participant who received vivid box by mail)

Another example comes from the manager of a museum who drove through and picked the vivid box:

> It is an amazing and interesting way of connecting with the audiences. Thank you for the package. It's a great example. I will have to develop something like this for my museum as well. (a museum manager who got the vivid box by driving through)

When we became unable to get mobile and reach others physically, we had to think creatively and think the other way around: We can also have the audience travel to us safely by using our DMHTT service innovation. Hence, we learned to think 'in, through, and outside the box' to find solutions.

Figure 2. DMHTT service innovation Vivid Box. *A hands-on experience and an educational box with multiple sensory objects*. (photo by the authors).

A STORY FROM A KAREN VILLAGE

Before COVID-19, Vivid Ethnicity served as a means for helping build and establish the ecomuseum *Doi Si Than* in a Karen community in Chiang Mai province. We have since created a digital archive for collecting cultural heritage data for future use. However, due to the pandemic, we were not able to take our mobile museum to the community and had to rely on our mobile phones to communicate with our research partners in the community and with our participants. We also worked closely with children – always under supervision and with their parents' informed consent. Over the years, we became like family members for them. Before the COVID-19, when we visited the village, we always brought gifts for them on special occasions, such as birthdays or new year. It was like celebrating with our own family. The children always drew pictures to welcome us. During the pandemic, we missed seeing each other very much. We used Messenger video to maintain contact and check in with them every now and then. The children still showed us the pictures they had drawn for us.

Since it was of utmost importance to continue working on our ecomuseum and to see what was going on in the field, we proposed that the children participants photograph and record a video story of their everyday life and send it to us through Messenger. That way we could stay up to date with their lives and collect some data. In return, we offered them some small gifts, such as a radio-controlled car, a football, a robot, or an inflatable swimming pool, which we would have given them on other occasions anyway.

The children liked the idea and started sending pictures and videos to us. But interaction went far beyond daily routines. As one of the kids who had been participating in our ecomuseum project had a skateboard accident, we contacted him using video call to wish him a quick recovery. We phoned him every week to see if he was getting better. After three months, he had fully recovered. Later, another boy

participating in our research project got involved in a car accident. We made sure to video call him to cheer him up every week, and soon he was getting better.

Digital technology helped us to stay in close contact with our research participants. The mobile ethnography (Muskat et al., 2017) approach that complements traditional ethnographic methods with the use of mobile devices proved an important means of keeping in touch with the community that we had been working with. We found the mobile ethnography method useful as it worked well for maintaining contact with the children every week, to cheer them up and to ask questions about how they were doing. We collected and documented photographs, drawings, and videos about their everyday life and are currently curating an online exhibition on the Google Arts & Culture platform.[4]

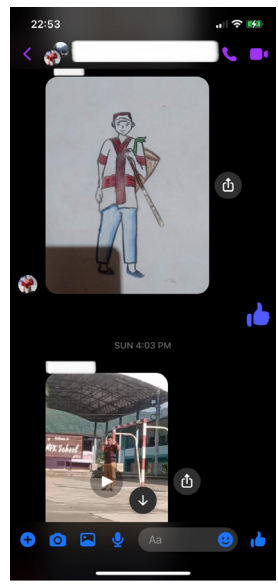

Figure 3. Mobile ethnography with children at ecomuseum *Doi Si Than. A picture of photos and videos created by children in the community, sent through the Facebook Messenger platform*. (photo by the authors).

THE STORY FROM A LUA VILLAGE

The Lua/Lawa are considered the first people of Chiang Mai province (Kunstadter, 1966). This ethnic group lives throughout the Thanon Thongchai mountain range, a border area between the Mae Chaem and Hod districts in Chiang Mai and the Maesarieng and Mae La Noi districts in Mae Hong Son province.

In January 2021, the ethnic group network was planning to inaugurate their own Lua festival to showcase the strength of the group and encourage the new generation to learn about and be proud of their ethnic identity. The first Lua festival was held at

4 Google Arts & Culture: Discover the life of Karen Community at Doi Si Than Ecomuseum. https://artsandculture.google.com/incognito/story/gQWhQSbMtRgUdw

Bann Hao, Mae Chaem district in Chiang Mai province, which was the field research site of one of our researchers during his doctoral degree research. The head of the village, who had been in contact with the researcher for almost twenty years, asked the researcher to be part of the event as an academic representative for the village.

Since the pandemic was still rampant at that time, it was very challenging to plan the event under such unpredictable conditions, as we did not know if it would be possible to hold the festival onsite or not. The village was closed to outsiders, and even we were not able to travel to the village. To avoid great loss, we agreed to create an exhibition that could be experienced online or offline, depending on the situation, on 29 April 2022, the date that had been set for the festival.

During the preparations for the festival, we convened online meetings with the community. Lua people were familiar with online meetings. Yet, the main issue we encountered was a poor internet connection for those team members who joined the session from the village, which is situated in a remote area in the mountains. Against all odds, after these meetings, the researchers and the Lua participants were confident that the festival was going to happen. They named the festival "The First National Lua Day". For the Lua ethnic group, this was an enormous step forward for their cultural movement.

Eventually, the festival was held as scheduled in the village of Hao. The temporary exhibition we had prepared was printed and mailed to the village in advance as we did not know whether or not we would be able to attend the event. Yet, on the day of the festival, we did manage to attend in person and set up the exhibition. However, the most important aspect for us was that the Lua people had successfully managed to co-curate the exhibition by using ICT as a tool. Beside stories describing their lives,

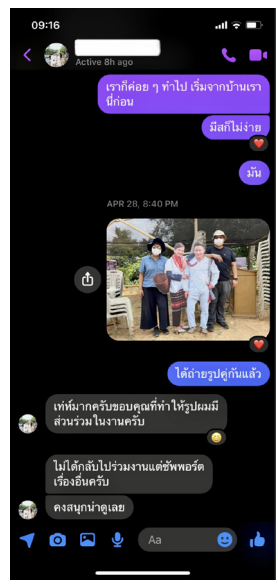

Figure 4. Photos sent by Lua People in the community via Messenger. *Photos of Lua people showing how Lua people helped co-curate the festival by sending us their photos for the exhibition*. (photo by the authors).

Figure 5. Lua Ban Hao Exhibition at the First Lua Festival in Ban Hao, Mae Chaem, Chiangmai. *Exhibition co-curated and co-created with Lua Ban Hao*. (photo by the authors).

they displayed everyday artifacts and objects as well as fresh fruits and herbs, corn, and rice from the harvest. Traditional Lua dresses were worn by members of the community. Next to the exhibition, various other cultural practices were performed, such as a ceremony for a new house, local plays, local cultural performances, and so on. Lua people from ten villages, totaling more than 500 people, attended the festival. It would not have been possible to organize this festival without the prior use of ICT.

LESSONS LEARNT

The Vivid Ethnicity mobile museum was, to some extent, able to function without actually being mobile. It did so by connecting to people in remote areas by using ICT to exchange information, photos, videos, and drawings through affordable online applications such as Messenger, Line, and other social media platforms. Our experiences showed that ICT tools proved useful in connecting to parties who had been cut off in terms of access and travelling, even though ICT had not been considered a solution to communication problems in research and co-creation processes. Mobile ethnography helped us collect data from the field despite the pandemic having suspended all onsite activities related to the ecomuseum project. In response to the circumstances, we resolved to create solutions for Vivid Ethnicity through a threefold *cope-adapt-transform* strategy.

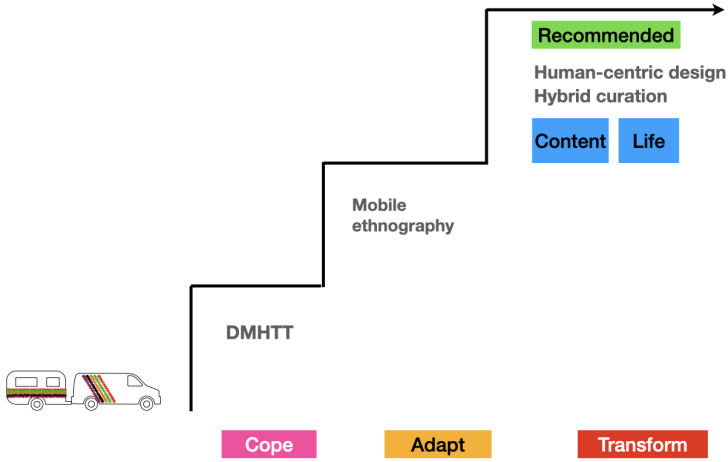

Figure 5. Hybrid curation model: Cope-adapt-transform.

Our DMHTT service innovation Vivid Box was a solution for **coping** in such a situation as the box allowed the audience to learn about ethnic groups individually, at home, through multiple sensory experiences. Continuously working with our ethnic group partners in remote areas with the help of mobile devices and strongly empathizing with them constituted an **adaptation** process. We maintained our links and relationships by remaining close – even at a distance – and learning about their needs as well as the community's capacities. After we had found ways to cope with and adapt to the pandemic, we finally **transformed** our way of working with the communities by using mobile ethnography as a tool to collect everyday life stories and store the data online either for online access or to exhibit onsite. This transformative stage meant that we had to think carefully about how to develop a human-centric research design[5] (Roumani & Both, 2020) despite the absence of face-to-face encounters with our research partners. We transformed our roles from 'distant' researchers to becoming a part of the community, and this way we could maintain relationships of trust. We learnt to be more flexible and broadly concerned about issues, not just pertaining to our project but also relevant to our participants themselves. Being with them (even through mobile devices) as family members encouraged us to take a human-centric and a less academic approach to our work. As a result, we became hybrid curators of an exhibition that transcends the content presented and actively integrates into and merges with our research partners' everyday lives. This became possible through engagement with the community and by showing that museums are not only there to exhibit things and activities, but also to support them, even in challenging circumstances. Vivid Ethnicity is hence a hybrid curation model that showcases a mobile museum working with a disconnected community.

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5 A human-centric design is a concept deriving from design thinking. It is action-oriented, deeply human, and experimental. To understand people's needs is significant to design critical and creative solutions to their problems.

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DISCLOSURE

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Impeded Migration as Adaptation: COVID-19 and Its Implications for Translocal Strategies of Environmental Risk Management[1]

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In the debates over environmental impacts on migration, migration as adaptation has been acknowledged as a potential risk management strategy based on risk spreading and mutual insurance of people living spatially apart: Migrants and family members that are left behind stay connected through a combination of financial and social remittances, joint decision-making, and mutual commitment. Conceptualizing migration as adaptation through the lens of translocal livelihood systems enables us to identify the differentiated vulnerabilities of households and communities. COVID-19 and the restrictions on public life and mobility imposed by governments worldwide constituted a complex set of challenges for translocal systems and strategies, especially in the Global South. Focusing on examples, we highlight two points: First, the COVID-19 crisis shows the limits of migration and translocal livelihoods for coping with, and adapting to, climate and environmental risks. Second, as these restrictions hit on a systemic level and affect places of destination as well as origin, the crisis reveals specific vulnerabilities of the translocal livelihood systems themselves. Based on the translocal livelihoods approach, we formulate insights and recommendations for policies that move beyond the narrow, short-term focus on the support of migrant populations alone and address the longer-term root causes of the vulnerabilities in translocal livelihoods systems.

Keywords: COVID-19; Environmental Risk Management; Immobility; Migration; Translocal Livelihoods

1 This article is an updated and revised version of a blog contribution to the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Environmental Migration Portal (https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/blogs/impeded-migration-adaptation-covid-19-and-its-implications-translocal-strategies-environmental-risk-management).

INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING "MIGRATION AS ADAPTATION" AGAINST ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS THROUGH THE LENS OF TRANSLOCAL RESILIENCE

In recent years, many migrants and their household members in places of origin have been exposed to a double crisis: the ongoing climate emergency and the COVID-19 pandemic. These two crises are interrelated in several ways and can pose significant challenges to the well-being, livelihoods and resilience of these households and their communities. To better understand these interconnections and their implications for policy, we propose a translocal social resilience perspective. While (forced) migration can be the result of in-situ adaptation failure, in many cases migration might be an active strategy (McLeman & Smit, 2006; Vinke et al., 2020) adopted by individuals and households to decrease vulnerability and to better deal with environmental and climate risks (Black et al., 2011). Migrants who live and work away from home stay connected with households and communities in their place of origin through various means, such as sending financial and social remittances, engaging in joint decision-making and strategizing, or social networking. This translocal connectedness (Peth et al., 2018; Peth & Sakdapolrak, 2020; Porst & Sakdapolrak, 2020) enables households and communities to spread risks across different locations and sectors: Remittances from tourism, industry or service sectors from migrants' places of destination can, for example, counter the environmentally induced failure of harvests in rural areas. As such, translocal connectedness has the potential to enhance the ability of households and communities to respond to climatic risks and sustain their livelihoods and wellbeing. As they heavily impeded this connectedness, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the respective containment and mitigation measures were systemic and felt by global, national, and local systems alike. And they became manifest simultaneously in migrants' places of origin and destination, stretching strategies of migration as adaptation to their limits (Sakdapolrak et al., 2023).

We propose to investigate the mechanisms of this process and the implications of the COVID-19 crisis on migration as adaptation through a translocal social resilience perspective. We will begin by introducing the conceptual framework of translocal social resilience, which highlights the interplay between migration and social resilience in different locations. Drawing on news media reports, we will then present examples South, East, and Southeast Asia of how the pandemic and related mitigation measures have affected translocal livelihood systems, and how this has impacted households' ability to cope with environmental and climate risks. Finally, we will discuss the policy implications of our findings, arguing that a translocal social resilience perspective can provide a valuable framework for designing effective and equitable policies to support vulnerable populations in times of crisis.

CONCEPTUALISING TRANSLOCAL SOCIAL RESILIENCE, AND UNDERSTANDING THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS

A translocal social resilience approach shifts the focus away from single-sided views of either migrants or households in the place origin, of either rural or urban places and issues: Instead, migrants (households) in places of destination and family

or household members in the place of origin are understood as a single, functional social unit (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013). The concept of translocality emphasizes the multi-dimensional and continuing links and connections between migrants and their places of origin and the resulting socio-spatial interdependencies (Etzold & Sakdapolrak, 2016; see Figure 1).

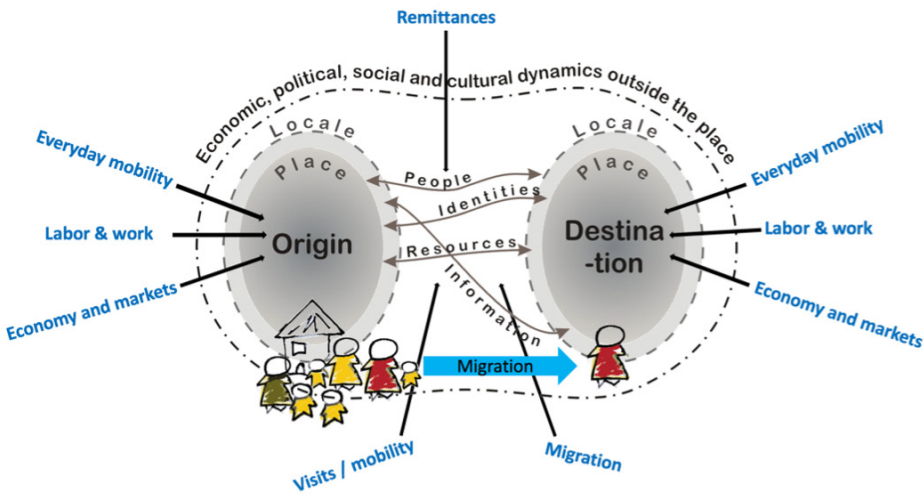

Figure 1. Translocal livelihoods. (figure by the authors, based on: Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013).

It is important to understand that migration (and, from a functional perspective, translocal livelihoods) is one out of several possible strategies of households to deal with a broad range of risks. However, as environmental and climate risks such as floods or droughts often affect whole communities or regions, strategies such as migration that allow for the spreading of risks and livelihood opportunities across locations and sectors are especially important when dealing with such risks (Burnham & Ma, 2016; Wiederkehr et al., 2018).

A translocal perspective provides us with a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which migration can serve as an adaptive strategy. This includes an examination of how individual capabilities and aspirations influence the decision to migrate (Porst & Sakdapolrak, 2018), as well as an exploration of the legal, employment, and housing conditions in the destination country and how these factors relate to remittance sending. Furthermore, this perspective considers the ability of households in the places of origin to transform financial and social remittances into adaptive and transformative actions in response to environmental, economic, social, and political changes. Additionally, it explores the capacity of both migrants and their family members in the places of origin to engage in self-organization and collective action at the community level and beyond.

The COVID-19 crisis influences the core mechanisms for translocal resilience building in at least two ways: First, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the maintenance of livelihoods in both the places of origin and destination due to several factors, including the illness of migrants due to exposure, mobility restrictions,

and the resulting economic downturn. These factors severely undermine the ability of households to diversify risks through translocal embeddedness and access to livelihood opportunities, especially in the informal economies of the Global South (Suhardiman et al., 2021). Second, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely weakened and disrupted translocal connectedness, which encompasses the transfer of both tangible and intangible resources between migrants and their households, as well as translocal mobilities. The pandemic has had wide-ranging impacts on various aspects of translocal connectedness, including the ability to send and receive remittances, maintain translocal ties through visits, and utilize migration, including seasonal migration, as a coping or adaptation strategy for environmental risks (Phillips et al., 2020).

To comprehensively analyze the impeded potential of migration as adaptation, it is essential to focus initially on the vulnerability of translocal livelihood systems, which comprises migrants residing in places of destination and their household and family members in places of origin. Consequently, in the following section we will examine three critical aspects that render translocal livelihood systems vulnerable to the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic: i) their exposure to external stressors; ii) their sensitivity; and iii) the adaptive strategies of the actors involved.

With regard to the (i) exposure, we need to acknowledge the multiple stresses and perturbations that especially migrants, including refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), but also their households and family members in places of origin, face. This includes the following non-exhaustive list: a) COVID-19 infection; b) mobility restrictions and forced immobility; c) forced mobility; d) quarantine; e) business closure and economic downturn; f) criminalization and stigmatization; g) violence and conflict; h) media portrayal and defamation; i) legal and social discrimination.

Furthermore, we need to consider the full range of characteristics that shape the (ii) sensitivity of translocal livelihoods, and thus of migrants and their household members in places of origin: a) health status; b) livelihoods, poverty and food insecurity; c) housing and shelter; d) social embedding and status; e) legal rights and welfare provision; f) mobility and immobility; g) (insecure) legal status; h) unsafe work/housing conditions.

Moreover, (iii) there needs to be an understanding of how the actors within the translocal livelihood systems, migrants and their household members in places of origin, are actively coping and adapting to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, from whom they get support (government, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, private sector, civil society, family and friends), and in which areas (basic needs, financial, legal, social-psychological).

Lastly, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic also extend beyond the household level: Migrants' places of destination are affected, for example, by lack of labor, as returned migrants are missing or cannot fill seasonal jobs due to border closures, and the communities in places of origin are affected by decreased remittance flows, competition over resources, or social and political tensions arising from the return of large numbers of migrants.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON TRANSLOCAL LIVELIHOODS, AND THE ENSUING DECREASED RESILIENCE AGAINST ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS

In order to better understand the multidimensional ways in which COVID-19 mitigation measures affect translocal livelihoods, a database[2] has been set up at the University of Vienna. The database collects and systematizes global online media coverage regarding the impacts of COVID-19 and the related containment and mitigation measures on migrants and their translocal livelihood systems. It is searchable in the categories outlined in the previous section and thus allows a global as well as country-specific understanding of ongoing processes. As of March 2022, the database includes 5779 news headlines from 224 countries and territories. The following examples provide an overview of different thematic areas derived from the cases collected in the database (see Figure 2):

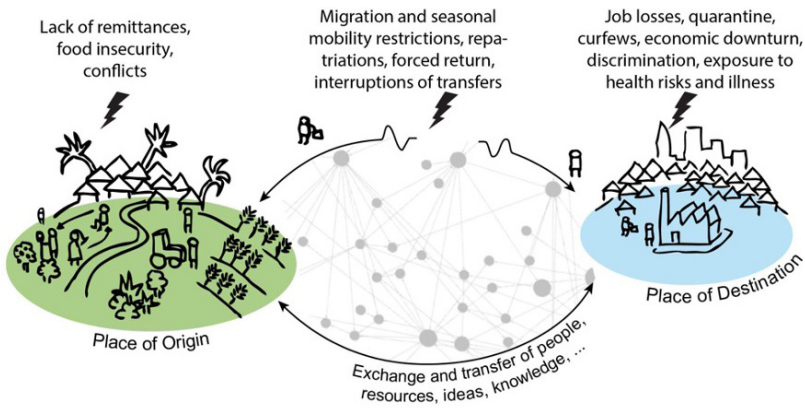

Figure 2. Impact dimensions of COVID-19 measures on translocal livelihoods. (figure by the authors).

Impact of Mobility Restrictions on Translocal Livelihoods

The restriction of everyday mobility and access to public spaces is a widely applied COVID-19 containment measure. However, these measures have had significant impacts on the livelihoods of migrants and small-scale entrepreneurs, who were unable to reach their places of work (e.g., factories) or conduct self-employment activities (e.g., selling goods in public spaces). These impacts were felt in migrants' places of origin and destination, thereby simultaneously stressing both sides of the translocal livelihoods systems. Two examples highlight these impacts:

Foremost, a hat manufacturer and retailer in Nantong, China, was only able to resume production at 80% capacity in February 2020 after the government-ordered factory closure. This was because hundreds of Foremost's (migrant) employees, who lived outside Nantong (but not in their home villages), were unable to return to work due to travel restrictions (Lee, 2020). This resulted in de facto joblessness, making it impossible for these migrant workers to remit money home.

2 See https://covid-migration.univie.ac.at/

In the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, mobility restrictions severely impacted the lives of rural populations in places of origin. The "Janta Curfew" in April 2020 (Vishwakarma, 2020) prevented farmers, laborers, and small-time traders from attending to their work, leading to food and supply shortages and price increases. Farmers also experienced labor shortages, as most farm laborers are migrant workers from other states who were unable to move due to the curfew.

Economic Downturn, Market Disruptions, Return Migration, and Conflicts

The COVID-19 crisis has had severe economic impacts, causing market disruptions, unemployment, and food price hikes, particularly affecting migrant workers. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) warned of a "looming food crisis" in early April 2020 (Cremer, 2020). Evidence for the intertwined stressors for migrants can be observed in the case of India: Tens of thousands of internal migrant workers tried to return to their places of origin as they lost their jobs due to factory closures (Vishwakarma, 2020), and the (public) transportation system ceased to operate. In several cases, people walked thousands of kilometers to make it back home to their families, many of them dying on their way (Pandey, 2020). In many cases, migrant workers did not have the choice to wait out the end of curfews, because not only joblessness but also food price hikes up to 50 percent made survival in Delhi impossible for migrants from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand. Although the government provided food and shelter in schools to stranded migrant workers, the report finds that public assistance did not meet the high demand of support caused by the multiple crises. Returning migrant workers have increased the supply of labor and demand for resources in their localities of origin and might lead to fierce competition over scarce jobs, which has on occasions resulted in property disputes triggered in their home villages (Sharma & Jain, 2020).

Drying Up of Financial Remittances

As early as April 2020, the World Bank estimated an overall decline of remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries by around 20% for 2020 (USD 445 billion) as compared to 2019 (USD 554 billion). However, analyses from 2021 show that the overall decline was only 1.6% in 2020 (KNOMAD, 2021, p. X). The causes for this include the shift from informal to formal channels for money transfer, the influence of exchange rates, as well as the use of savings and the restriction of personal consumption. Despite this overall stability, the official and aggregated data only provide a partial view since informal flows and domestic transfers are not accounted for, and regional differences are obscured. The ability to transfer money is affected by residency status, gender, and access to social security systems at the destination. For example, studies reveal that while working migrants in Singapore with secure employment can continue to remit money home, irregular foreign workers in Thailand who lack income security due to job loss are unable to transfer remittances and often have to return to their home countries (Suhardiman et al., 2021). The Philippines is particularly vulnerable to the decline in remittances, as financial remittances sent to the country represent nearly 10% of its GDP. As of May 2020, nearly 90,000 overseas

migrant workers in the Philippines were either displaced or had no income due to COVID-19 containment and mitigation measures, severely affecting the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people who depend on these remittances.

Disruption of (Mutual) Visits and Mobility

Migrant workers involved in translocal livelihood systems often spend extended periods away from home in their places of destination (Peth et al., 2018), making periodic visits to their families vital for maintaining social relations and promoting mental health. Visits mostly take place on the occasions of important religious feasts such as the end of Ramadan. With the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia had been grappling with one of the most severe COVID-19 outbreaks in Southeast Asia. During the Ramadan period in May 2020, the Indonesian government imposed a ban on all holiday travel as part of its COVID-19 mitigation strategy (Jamaluddin et al., 2020). Consequently, the government advised tens of thousands of migrant workers in Singapore and Malaysia to avoid traveling home to Indonesia to celebrate Idul Fitri, the end of Ramadan, with their families (Pinandita, 2020).

Impacts on Migration

Translocal livelihood systems are not only well-established worldwide but are being established every day. However, since the outbreak of COVID-19 the world experienced unprecedented global travel bans, immigration restrictions and business closures. These measures had far-reaching implications, especially for individuals who had planned to work outside their places of origin. For example, Nepalese migrant workers were among those impacted, with many experiencing wage losses along with the loss in investments already made on work permits, travel documents and tickets due to restrictions on leaving for their work destinations (Coronavirus Travel Bans Hit, 2020). As of mid-March 2020, Nepalese overseas recruitment agencies stopped issuing labor permits in response to immigration bans implemented by most countries of destination. Prior to the ban, an average of 1,500 Nepali migrant workers left for the Middle East, Malaysia, and South Korea to work as domestic workers and in the construction industry. Unfortunately, for most of the affected migrant workers, there were no alternative job opportunities available in Nepal.

Understanding these mechanisms of translocal social resilience (and its potential failure) is important to understand the reasons why, to what degree, and in which circumstances the COVID-19 pandemic is bringing migration as adaptation to its limits. In Bangladesh, for example, even modest amounts of remittances from domestic migration form an important part of many rural households' livelihood strategies to cope with environmental risks. In 2020, the combination of exceptionally intense flooding with the lack of income due to closed garment factories made the situation especially dire for many domestic migrants and their rural households (Kelly, 2020). In Nepal, the lack of remittances from international migrants, many of whom were forced to return to their home villages due to visa cancellations, made it difficult for households and communities to cope with landslides caused by intense rainfalls (Tsering, 2020). And in the Horn of Africa, the decline of remittances in combination

with the locust invasion has driven food prices and threatened food security, especially of children in poor rural households (Save the Children, 2020). These situations pose different threats and stresses to translocal social livelihoods, they prompt different strategies by the migrants and their (rural) households in places of origin, and thus require different forms of political action for support or relief.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKING

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted – at least temporarily – in more restrictive immigration processes, disrupted translocality, and related hardships. These consequences actually should have required a multi-level policy response with short-term measures aimed at establishing social protection programs addressing income and food insecurity and improving access to health services, sanitary measures and primary care – in particular for migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons, 'trapped' populations, and those who are highly vulnerable to environmental risks. However, there is little to suggest that national governments' short- and medium-term responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have had a particular focus on these groups. One of the few exceptions is the accelerated disbursement of unemployment insurance and extension to migrant workers by the Chinese government (IMF, 2021).

Nonetheless, we still need a better understanding of the lessons learned so far; systematic surveys and evaluations of impacts but also good practices are necessary to help prepare for future pandemics. Importantly, long-term impacts of COVID-19 policy responses on migration as adaptation to environmental change in different country contexts need to be further examined to inform social security interventions in anticipation of future global crises. Moreover, further trust in, and capacity building of, local authorities, implementing agencies, and disease surveillance systems is certainly needed. However, one important future lesson is obvious: Long-term oriented, broadened, and integrated social, economic, and environmental policies aimed at translocal resilience of livelihoods are needed. Specifically, in locations with both high migration flows and exposure to environmental hazards, policy responses need to be better targeted in terms of social and health protection mechanisms, labor market interventions, or rural and urban development programs. Translocal livelihoods could be supported through direct employment in public sector projects aimed at conservation and restoration of degrading land and forest ecosystems (in both areas of origin and destination), hence delivering a "triple dividend" by contributing to local social, economic, and ecological resilience.

These policies should be interlocked with several community-based measures such as capacity building workshops to raise awareness about migration and environmental risks to translocal livelihoods among (local) decision makers. Such initiatives could also help to identify how migrants and their families can best be supported through policy interventions or practical measures. Financial training measures for households and individuals might enable migrants and households to make the most of financial remittances by promoting financial literacy and strengthening financial planning and risk management skills. Establishing local migration funds could enhance the potential benefits among community members. Strengthening capacities of return migrants by supporting communities in accessing finance services and

adopting climate-smart agricultural or non-farm business models may strengthen community resilience to the adverse effects of environmental and climate change. Preparation and mentoring for future migrants and their relatives give the latter the opportunity to reflect on potential migration-related challenges and goals.

A major policy challenge is related to priorities and attitude: The positive news here is that migration in the context of climate change and environmental degradation is fully back on the agenda – even if COVID-19 has led to disrupted processes and a lower priority for issues of migration and displacement by governments, international organizations, and development cooperation agencies. To date, a heterogeneous and polycentric policy landscape addressing various issues of climate change and human mobility has emerged. Numerous actors, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), regional organizations such as the European Union (EU) or the East African Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD), the UN Climate Secretariat UNFCCC, and development cooperation institutions are just a few of the central "elements" of this landscape. Related activities cut across different policy and action fields ranging from climate change, environmental degradation, migration, forced displacement, disaster risk reduction, development, and human rights, to conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

This diversity of policy fields involved is important because the starting point for more integrated and "pro-translocality" related policy actions, as described above, would at least raise awareness of, and at best create a joint attitude on, migration at all levels and in different relevant policy fields – not only in the specific context of the discourse on the migration-climate change nexus. An ideal-type policy makers' attitude should be characterized by the willingness to overcome a sedentary bias, which is still very influential in many policy fields, and to foster a policy approach that seeks to promote the potential of translocal livelihood systems. However, such a joint attitude does not yet exist. Furthermore, the focus of activities targeting the climate mobility nexus so far is rather more on data generation/empirical evidence, awareness raising, and fostering policy dialogues than on "concrete action on the ground".

The COVID-19 pandemic has probably increased the acceptance of radical changes. So, there might be a chance to prioritize the human mobility, climate change, and health nexus in the future. As climate change is expected to result in a higher frequency of climate-related disasters and increasing livelihoods risks, it is expected that population movements will continue to rise. Instead of curtailing mobility even further through nationalism, enhanced collaboration among international actors would allow for continued advancement measures to deal with human mobility in the context of environmental changes (see also, Paoletti & Vinke, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures to contain it hit migrants especially hard; however, the impact goes far beyond the migrants themselves, also including their household and family members in places of origin. These effects are multidimensional, including the domains of health, economics, mobility, legal status, discrimination, housing, and others. A translocal social resilience perspective can help to understand

the mechanisms of these impacts: migrants and their family or household members in places of origin are thereby seen as a single functional and social unit, yet with distinct characteristics and vulnerabilities. Such a perspective enables us to disentangle the multiple social and spatial dimensions and scales through which these translocal livelihood systems are affected.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this, and from the insights of emerging field and media reports. First, the impacts of COVID-19 and related containment measures on translocal livelihoods are systemic, area-wide, and happen simultaneously across places: whereas migration and translocal livelihoods can well-enhance resilience against (environmental, market, health, etc.) risks at *either* origin *or* destination, the pandemic affects *both* origins *and* destinations, often disrupting the very mechanisms connecting places. Thus, COVID-19 brings the resilience of translocal livelihood systems to its limits. Second, the translocal social resilience perspective also allows for a closer look at the mechanisms of impacts, which are often specific and not evenly distributed for all countries, sectors, migration types, or social groups. Such a perspective can thus also help to guide more specific and targeted policies to alleviate the impacts of COVID-19 on migrants and their translocal households, and to maintain their resilience against environmental risks. Third, there is still little detailed empirical knowledge about the different ways in which the pandemic affects translocal social livelihood systems around the world, albeit there is growing evidence that it does so. A combined effort would be needed to gather relevant information and turn the resulting insights into political action to provide targeted and timely support to those who are in the direst need of it.

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DISCLOSURE

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Book Review: Ullah, AKM. A., & Chattoraj, D. (2022). COVID-19 Pandemic and the Migrant Population in Southeast Asia: Vaccine, Diplomacy and Disparity

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The book co-authored by AKM Ahsan Ullah and Diotima Chattoraj "COVID-19 Pandemic and the Migrant Population in Southeast Asia" is undoubtedly one of the most significant ones in the series of publications witnessed during and after the coronavirus pandemic period. As correctly pointed out by the authors in the preface, this volume is one of the few to address the impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers in Southeast Asia. The authors have anchored the book in empiricism. Consequently, located in the larger political economy of the pandemic, this volume offers crucial insights into how migrant workers negotiated the crises, how the precarity of work and living conditions informed their health and social vulnerability, and how the inoculation scape remained distant, conflicted, and highly skewed for the migrant workers in the Southeast Asian region, specifically Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei. This makes it a useful read for policymakers and practitioners aiming to learn from this pandemic and prepare for the next.

The book has six chapters, following an order of events that, in the words of the authors, start with the COVID-19 pandemic, and then move on to address how migrants were implicated in the pandemic in general and as a category offering "labour" in particular. Notwithstanding the level of skill and status of migrants, the authors observe that they always remained at risk – starting with the possibilities of quarantine and isolation, to accessing vaccines. Chapter 1, "The COVID-19 pandemic: shaker and shaper of the world", encapsulates the overall spirit of the volume so that the readers know what to expect in the next five chapters. It mainly tackles the subject of the coronavirus pandemic at large and its several impacts on a global scale.

In the second chapter, "Contextualizing the pandemic in the migration domain", the authors offer detailed accounts of how the pandemic impacted

migrant workers in Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei. It also addresses crucial topics like the poor work conditions of the migrant workers that led to limited possibilities of physical distancing. This chapter also engages with the question of which migrant workers could afford to quarantine and who could not. A related topic in this context is mobility restrictions and the privilege of immobility, which most of the migrant workers trapped in low-wage, blue-collar jobs could not practice. This chapter is significant in discussing some of the themes of what later came to be known in academic parlance as a shadow pandemic – the hazardous work and living situations of the migrant workers in wealthy countries like Singapore that the host countries usually hide from the rest of the world.

This is followed by a description of how the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities – the discourse presented in Chapter 3 is titled "COVID-19: An amplifier of existing inequalities". The authors mention various locales of inequality – social, economic, political, and health-related. This chapter draws our attention to how the pandemic affected both the migrant workers in the host countries and their families in the home countries, as the former could send fewer remittances home than otherwise. Setting the case of Southeast Asia on a global platform, the authors argue that the coronavirus pandemic left socially disadvantaged categories, including "disabled women, pregnant women, indigenous communities, persons living in geographically inaccessible locations, orphans, LGBTQI people, children, people who are part of DWD (discrimination based on work/ancestry) communities, and so on" (p. 103), far more scarred than others. In addition, the authors also point to the existence of two types of disparities – the existing forms of inequalities that are exhibiting further cleavages due to the pandemic and concomitant crises, and the new inequalities that emerged specifically due to the pandemic.

The next chapter, "Vaccine diplomacy and the COVID-19 pandemic", engages with one of the most avidly discussed issues in the world in recent times – how to battle the arrogance of big pharma in the face of global discrepancy in vaccine availability, vaccine literacy, and vaccine hesitancy. One of the hallmarks of this chapter in specific, and the book in general is the question posed here: what about immunization of undocumented migrants? This also points to the title of the chapter that deliberately uses the term "diplomacy" to emphasize the importance of cross-border tensions among nation-states especially during the pandemic. Since the pandemic forced countries to abruptly cut each other off from all sorts of mobilities among people, access to vaccination emerged as a contested terrain for proving one's citizenship and residence rights in the host country. Consequently, those without papers were the most likely to be left behind. Also, diplomacy and hegemony are relevant topics for understanding the discourse of vaccine legitimacy and vaccine approval. Did Southeast Asia buy most of its vaccines from China or the USA? Which country approved which vaccine? Another set of concerns arises from the way states like Singapore exercised vaccine authoritarianism ensuring that each of its citizens was compulsorily vaccinated. But does that ensure full immunity from a pandemic?

The last two chapters, "The pandemic, disparity and Southeast Asia" and "Are we in the endgame? Lessons learned", envisage a future beyond the pandemic and locate the broader discussion of pandemic and migration in the context of human rights and global disparity. Chapter 5 addresses the major issues of how the pandemic

affects and impacts the economy of Southeast Asia. The authors argue that because countries like Thailand and Malaysia rely heavily on tourism and export, the global lockdown and slow rate of human mobility later jeopardized their economies. This in turn could affect the rate of remittances to the home countries sent by the migrants. This chapter tries to drive home the point that the impact of the pandemic on migrant workers has consequences not just for the countries of immigration (Southeast Asia in this context) but the home countries too. However, the book ends with the hope that a post-pandemic future would enable migrants to "return to normal" (p. 258) and continue contributing to the global circulation of remittances.

Ullah and Chattoraj's volume reminds me of Leronzo Guadagno's (2020) "Migrants and the COVID-19 pandemic: An initial analysis", published as a part of the Migration Research Series curated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). While Guadagno addressed the pandemic-migration interface from a much broader platform and could only share insights from the initial phase of the global health crisis, Ullah and Chattoraj are able to present a nuanced analysis using empirical data and observation, specifically focusing on Southeast Asia. However, the book does not include all countries of Southeast Asia but focuses mainly on Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei, with some discussions on Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

While from an area studies point of view this book remains significant for both researchers and practitioners, it misses out on the larger context of pandemic and mobility for locating a specific discussion on COVID-19 and migrant workers. The coronavirus pandemic was not the first and will perhaps not be the last pandemic that the world will witness. From that standpoint, any attempt at learning from experiences, especially for policymakers, ought to embed the various facets of the crisis within a large spectrum of debates and insights. While this book does not claim to take any historical positioning, it perhaps is still useful to foreground the discussion on past pandemics and migration rather than migration networks.

Historicizing the pandemic-migration debate could also enable a deliberate avoidance of terms like "return to normal". While it must be acknowledged that the imagination and romanticization of the "normal" remained one of the guiding forces for most people all over the world during the entire period of the pandemic, a generalization of this term would be unfair. Normal cannot be a monolithic category for all migrants. It is crucial we ask, whose normal are we talking about, and what are the parameters of the normal considered here. For example, "normal" for the migrant workers in factories in Singapore was dingy life conditions even before the pandemic whose stories would never come out had it not been for COVID-19. Is a return to that normal romantic? Also, for several categories of migrants, refugees, and displaced people, for example the African students in China, the Nigerian refugees in the European Union, or the inter-state labourers in India who walked miles to reach home, a return to normal may never be possible. Lastly, although the book briefly addresses the vulnerability of non-male migrants, mostly categorizing them as women migrant workers, the feminization of the pandemic (Yavorsky et al., 2021) among non-male migrants in Southeast Asia remains an important subject of investigation and in need of further attention.

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