

Representation and Othering of Domestic Female Migrant Workers on Social Media: A Case Study on Taiwanese Employers' Facebook Group

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Abstract

This research delved into the current representation and othering phenomenon of domestic migrant workers (DMWs) by social media users in an open Taiwanese Facebook group—[I am an employer] Migrant Employers Exchange Forum (MEEF, [我是雇主] 移工雇主交流園地) by adopting a mixed-methods approach that combines elements of content analysis to decipher coding categories and the connotations from textual analysis to analyze the chosen texts. By also referring to the research framework of Hans J Ladegaard (2022), this research presented to the academia with a refined research framework in which both topics discussed and representation strategies used by potential or current employers of DMWs in this group were displayed. One of the most significant findings of this research can be attributed to the intersectionality between different strategies that were adopted by users in a single post or thread, which is something that past research has failed to present. The intersectional characteristic of the discourse also implied that important players such as gender, sexuality, race, and capital in the realm of DMWs were often intertwined and inseparable from each other when this kind of discourse was built.

Keywords: domestic migrant worker, employer, representation, othering, social media

Introduction

In January 2023, there were about 621,000 migrant workers in Taiwan (National Immigration Agency, 2023). According to Cheng (2016), nearly half of the migrant workers in Taiwan are female, who mainly work at locals' homes or nursing institutions. However, the phenomenon of migrant workers' contracts often being short-term provided an opportunity for the general society to neglect the abusive situation (Piper, 2010).

Despite the abusive situation, there is very little research that delves into the representation phenomenon of migrants/migrant workers on social media compared to that on traditional media. Very little existing research is directly targeted at this area (e.g., Ho, 2020; Hans J Ladegaard, 2022), and no similar study has been conducted in a Taiwanese context.

Given the research gap and the fact that Taiwan has gradually become one of the biggest receiving countries for Southeast Asian migrant workers, it is necessary and important to explore this topic.

Literature Review

When reviewing past research, it is found that qualitative research dealing with the othering phenomenon of migrant workers barely exists, especially in a Taiwanese context. Existing literature can mainly be divided into two categories: how migrant workers were portrayed on social media during disastrous events (Sharma & Agnimitra, 2020) and how employers adopted various othering strategies to portray migrant workers' image negatively on social media (Ho, 2020; Ladegaard, 2022). Setting the research context in India during the pandemic era, Sharma and Agnimitra (2020) discovered great differences between the method adopted by traditional media to portray migrant workers and the way social media users. Since traditional media emphasized more on the migrants' victimhood and their status as migrants instead of workers, their rights as workers were neglected, and the narration also contributed to the stigmatization and othering of these workers. In contrast, social media in this case was considered more "dynamic, vibrant and discursive" in the sense that it brought a lively discussion between the citizens, employers, and the governments through its interactive and unrestrained characteristics, but because of its nature as a digital stratosphere, the effect of citizen participation was restricted. (Sharma & Agnimitra, 2020, pp. 160–161).

In contrast, Ho (2020) and Ladegaard (2022) set their research targets as the othering and representation phenomenon of migrant workers in Hong Kong on social media, but their research results differed greatly from those of Sharma and Agnimitra (2020). Migrant workers in Hong Kong are mainly from Indonesia and the Philippines, of which more than 60% are women working as domestic helpers who are allegedly suffering from inadequate payment, accommodation, and day-offs, and are also entitled to several kinds of physical and verbal abuse (Ladegaard, 2022; Lai & Fong, 2020). Although employers sometimes illustrated their helpers as positive figures providing the family with food and motherly care, more often they are described as disobedient employees unwilling to show their gratitude (Ho, 2020). By analyzing the social media posts from an open Facebook Group consisting of employers of domestic helpers, Ladegaard (2022) demonstrated that there are mainly three kinds of othering strategies that employers adopted, including shaming, referring to aspersion and personal insults through the usage of "language of disgust" (Every, 2013, p. 674), racist attacks, referring to discrepancy based on race and nationality used to defame migrant workers (Augoustinos & Every, 2007), and other forms of demeaning discourses, referring to the

assumed moral inferiority of migrant workers used by employers to justify the former's marginalized status, that is, firing them or hindering them from future employment (Ladegaard, 2022).

In his research, Ladegaard (2022) also found that a number of the posts adopting racist-attack strategies carried gendered characteristics. For example, female migrant workers were attacked particularly for assumed conduct such as dating, being pregnant, and carrying STDs, and this complexity between race and gender in the online othering strategy thus served as a research path that deserved more attention.

Research Questions

With the othering strategies commonly used by employers proposed by Ladegaard (2022) as the analytical framework, including othering and shaming, othering and racialization, and othering and morality, this research hopes to enrich the existing research on the representation phenomenon of DMWs in the Taiwanese social media sphere. Under a Taiwanese social context, this research also looks forward to solve three research questions:

- (1) What kind of othering strategies are adopted in a Taiwanese context and how are the discourses of those strategies constructed?
- (2) Compared to the three othering strategies proposed by Ladegaard (2022), are there any different strategies used by Taiwanese employers, especially when the focus is on female migrant workers?
- (3) Since gender, sexuality, race, and capital are all important concepts and intersectional in the domain of DMW's representation, how are they represented respectively in Taiwanese employers' discourse on social media then?

Research Method

To better analyze the discourse created by Taiwanese employers to represent DMWs in the open Facebook group, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach of both content analysis and textual analysis as research methods. The researcher's decision to adopt a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods stems from the characteristics of both approaches. While content analysis is useful in this research to help decipher and infer the main categories of topics discussed and strategies used by the employers from the original text, textual analysis serves as a crucial tool to explore the hidden meanings, intentions, and power relations behind the text. With the adoption of both methods, the research ensured the completeness necessary to fully analyze the chosen texts, which is not possible when only one method is used.

Data Collection

All the social media posts and threads attached to them related to female migrant workers were retrieved from the open Facebook group called [I am an employer] Migrant Employers Exchange Forum (MEEF, [我是雇主] 移工雇主交流園地).

Research timeline for the posts was set from January 7th, 2022, to July 6th, 2023, and for their threads from January 7th, 2022, to August 16th, 2023. The research collected 29 posts and their 776 threads in total by setting the searching keywords as “女” (female) or “懷孕” (pregnant) to analyze the discussion among the two main themes.

To analyze the 29 posts and their 776 threads collected, all the data underwent a systematic numbering and coding procedure, but because of space limitations, the codebook will not be included in this paper.

Findings

Topics Discussed

Topics Discussed in Posts

Among the 29 posts collected in this research, 9 out of the total 12 topic categories were found in the post discourse. In Table 1, the category of Finding a job for a helper accounted for the highest percentage among all the topics, with 34%, followed by Questions about terms of employment with 17%, Complaints about DMWs with 10%, and Sharing of current policies also with 10% (see Table 1).

Table 1

Counts and Percentages of Each Topic Discussed in Posts

Topics discussed in posts	Counts	Percentage
Complaints about current policies	2	7%
Complaints about DMWs	3	10%
Finding a job for a helper	10	34%
Questions about terms of employment	5	17%
Sharing of current policies	3	10%
Sharing of news articles	1	3%
Sharing of questionnaires	1	3%
Revealing information of unqualified DMWs	2	7%
Finding a helper for an employer	2	7%
Sum	29	100%

Topics Discussed in Threads

Among the 776 threads attached to the 29 posts analyzed in the previous section, 11 out of the total 12 topic categories were found to be discussed. In this section, the percentage of each topic discussed was calculated to the first decimal digit to prevent some of the categories from being calculated as zero. Unlike in posts, where the topic discussed the most is finding a job for a helper, still oriented toward a factual narrating style, the topic discussed the most in threads is mainly covered by Complaints about DMWs, with a percentage of 37.0% (see Table 2).

Table 2*Counts and Percentages of Each Topic Discussed in Threads*

Topics discussed in threads	Counts	Percentage
Asking people to repost	1	0.1%
Complaints about agents	66	8.6%
Complaints about current policies	126	16.2%
Complaints about DMWs	287	37.0%
Finding a helper for an employer	1	0.1%
Finding a job for a helper	12	1.5%
N/A	8	1.0%
Questions about terms of employment	235	30.3%
Revealing information of unqualified DMWs	29	3.7%
Sharing of current policies	2	0.3%
Sharing of questionnaires	8	1.0%
Sum	776	100.0%

As presented in the two tables, it can be clearly concluded that although in posts, the topics usually deal with questions and facts, there is a tendency in threads to lead the topics to have more complaining content.

Strategies Used to Represent DMWs

Strategies Used to Represent DMWs in Posts

Among all the 29 posts collected in this research, 7 out of the 10 strategy categories used to represent DMWs were found in the discourse (see Table 3). In this section, the research calculated the percentage of each category by using the counts as numerators and the number of posts, 29, as the denominator.

The reason for this research to not use the number of all strategies' total counts as the denominator is because the calculation intends to know the actual frequency of each strategy that appeared in posts, not just portion of one strategy among all the strategy categories, and the same logic is applied to the section discussing about strategies used to represent DMWs in threads as well.

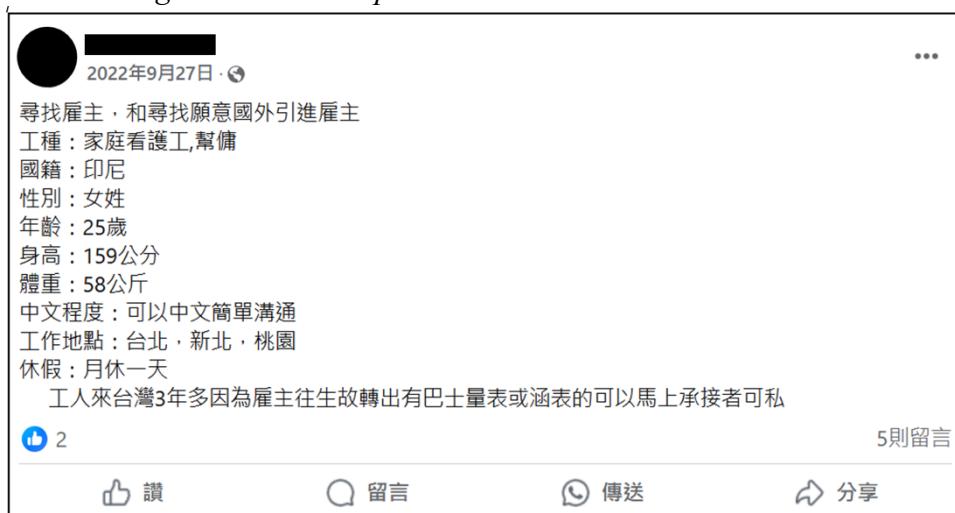
As presented in Table 3, the category with the highest counts in posts is Non-othering and neutral representation, with a percentage of 38%, followed by Othering and shaming (21%), Othering and criticizing the government (17%), Othering and genderization (14%), Othering and racialization (7%), and Non-othering and positive representation (3%).

Table 3*Counts and Percentage of Each Strategy Used to Represent DMWs in Posts*

Strategies used to represent DMWs in posts	Counts	Percentage (x/29+%)
Non-othering and positive representation	1	3%
Othering and criticizing the government	5	17%
Othering and shaming	6	21%
Othering and racialization	2	7%
Non-othering and neutral representation	11	38%
Othering and genderization	4	14%
Othering and sexual morality	1	3%

Non-othering and Neutral Representation

In the category Non-othering and neutral representation, the content of the posts usually presented DMWs as common people, with a neutral description of these workers. This kind of representation usually happened when the employers were finding a job for their helpers or when employers were looking for helpers for themselves (see Figure 1).

Figure 1*Non-othering and Neutral Representation*

Othering and Shaming

Moving on to the second largest category with a percentage of 21%, Othering and shaming, however, it usually involved direct attacks on DMWs owing to some allegedly unacceptable behavior such as not doing enough amount of the housework, quitting the job in advance, or running away (see Figure 2).

As displayed in Figure 2, the employer started her post by straightly attacking her previous DMW and referring to her as “a lousy foreign maid” (爛外傭), with perceived sufficient reasons to justify the shaming of the worker, such as not fulfilling the agreed-upon job responsibilities (講好的工作內容都沒做), speaking rudely (說話沒大沒小), loving to lie (愛

說謊), having a bad temper (脾氣不好), talking endlessly on the phone (電話講不停), and recording videos and audio to falsely accuse the employer.

In Taiwan, since the names “foreign maid” (外傭) and “foreign labor” (外勞) have long been attached with a negative and stigmatized image for DMWs, the power relation between a maid and a mistress of the house was further strengthened, justifying the action of shaming from the employer’s side.

Figure 2

Othering and Shaming



Translation:

My family previously had a lousy foreign maid; the agreed-upon job responsibilities were not done, she spoke rudely, loved to lie, had a bad temper, talked endlessly on the phone, and would even record videos and audio to falsely accuse the employer. Everyone, please be cautious. Passport number: xxxxxx, Name: xxx xxx, 27 years old, Indonesian. This domestic helper was taken on by a female employer surnamed You in central Taiwan on April 19. Please be careful.

Othering and Criticizing the Government

The category that took third place in terms of percentage is Othering and criticizing the government, with a rate of 17%.

After the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government, the current ruling party of Taiwan, took office, it implemented more migrant-worker-friendly policies. Thus, the employers attempted to portray the DMWs, along with the DPP government's favoring of them, as the "them" group, and the employers, who had to bear the consequences they caused, as the "us" group.

In this example, the condition of DMWs' running away was linked to the non-action of the Ministry of Labor under the DPP government, with the words “doing nothing” (擺爛) and “being incapable” (失能), and the two were then otherized together (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
Othering and Criticizing the Government



Translation:

“When will the government management agencies stop shirking their responsibilities?”

Immigration Agency Statistics as of 2022/4/19:

“Total missing migrant workers: 61,435.”

“Missing migrant caregivers: 30,132.”

Immigration Agency Statistics as of 2022/7/20:

“Total missing migrant workers: 70,331.”

“Missing migrant caregivers: 31,792.”

“How much longer will the Ministry of Labor remain ineffective??”

Strategies Used to Represent DMWs in Threads

Among all the 776 threads collected in this research, all ten categories were found in this discourse. The categories taking the first four places went to Non-othering and neutral representation with a percentage of 28%, Othering and shaming with 22%, Othering and racialization with 19%, and Othering and criticizing the government with 18%, only 1% away from the previous category (see Table 4).

Table 4

Counts and Percentages of Each Strategy Used to Represent DMWs in Threads

Strategies used to represent DMWs in posts	Counts	Percentage (x/776+%)
N/A	8	1%
Non-othering and neutral representation	219	28%
Non-othering and positive representation	12	2%
Othering and blaming agents	74	10%
Othering and racialization	150	19%
Othering and comforting other employers	31	4%
Othering and criticizing the government	136	18%
Othering and sexual morality	59	8%
Othering and shaming	174	22%
Othering and genderization	8	1%

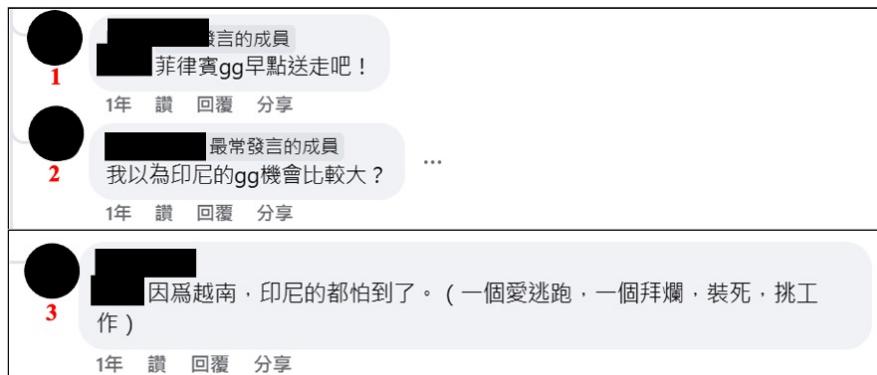
Othering and Racialization

One example of Othering and racialization can be found in some of the threads from a post asking people what to do when his/her DMW argued to go back home after two days of her arrival (see Figure 4).

Even when the post did not mention the nationality of the assumed problematic DMW, the three threads directly attacked the worker's ethnicity and overgeneralized it as the main cause for the poster's problems, concluding that the employer should send the worker away.

With the oversimplified narration, workers from both countries were framed into particular stigmatized stereotypes in which their personalities and behaviors were assumed to be completely corresponding to their nationalities.

Figure 4
Othering and Racialization Case Three



Translation:

Thread 1: “Filipino workers meant game over, send them away earlier!”

Thread 2: “I thought Indonesian workers had a bigger chance to game over?”

Thread 3: “I am scared because of both Vietnamese and Indonesian (workers); one loves to run away, the other is lazy, pretends to be dead, and picks work.”

Othering and Sexual Morality

Being the sixth largest category among the threads, Othering and sexual morality was one of the most attacking strategies among all, with employers often targeting at the sexuality of DMWs and adapting othering strategies used to assault the female gender in general to the context of DMWs.

As displayed in Figure 5, the post shared a current policy of how DMWs can apply for a suspension of being transferred out by the employers once found pregnant (see Example 5).

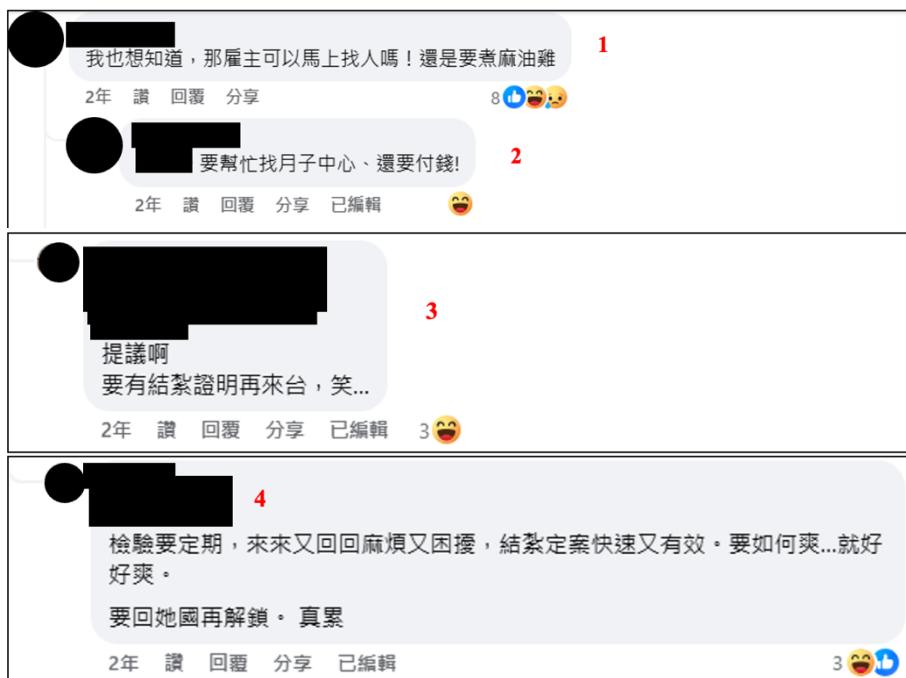
In the first and second threads, the opposing opinions of the employers toward DMWs' pregnancy was first put forward with the first thread sarcastically saying “can the employer find someone else immediately then? Or he/she just has to cook sesame oil chicken (for her)” (那雇主可以馬上找人嗎！還是要煮麻油雞).

Under the Taiwanese context, sesame oil chicken is a dish in which the chicken is cooked with seasonings such as rice wine and sesame oil, and is often offered to postpartum women to help them recover. Therefore, by making a comparison between hiring someone immediately and cooking sesame oil chicken, the user implied that if the policy forbids the employer from firing the DMW once pregnant, then the employer will simply be stuck with a pregnant worker, assumed to be useless and needing extra care because of pregnancy.

In the third and fourth threads, the users brought up the topic proposing that all DMWs should be ligatured before coming to Taiwan, as Taiwanese government already abolished the regulation of testing whether DMWs carry STDs or are pregnant upon arrival.

By proposing the idea of ligaturing DMWs, the discourse again proved that to Taiwanese employers, the sexuality and lust of DMWs were undesirable and unwanted. In Taiwan, gender equality and women's body autonomy are common concepts among all other gender topics and are also considered familiar to most of the Taiwanese. However, with the way the users built their discourse, the autonomy and freedom that Taiwanese women enjoyed now did not automatically apply to migrant women, and were forbidden instead.

Figure 5
Othering and Sexual Morality



Translation:

Thread 1: “I want to know too—can the employer find someone else immediately then? Or he/she just has to cook sesame oil chicken (for her)?”

Thread 2: “We will have to help look for a postpartum center and even pay for her!”

Thread 3: “Here's a suggestion: require proof of ligaturing before they (DMWs) are allowed to come to Taiwan. lol....”

Thread 4: “Sexually transmitted disease testing has to be done regularly, and the constant back-and-forth is such a hassle and burden. Sterilization would be a quick and effective solution.”

Discussion

In this section, I wanted to respond to the main research questions proposed earlier.

Othering Strategies Adopted

For the first question, as mentioned previously, the representation strategies used the most by employers in posts are Non-othering and neutral representation (38%), Othering and shaming (21%), Othering and criticizing the government (17%), and Othering and genderization (14%). As for threads, strategies frequently used are Non-othering and neutral representation (28%), Othering and shaming (22%), Othering and racialization (19%), and Othering and criticizing the government (18%).

Judging first from a descriptive statistics point of view, it can be seen that a rather neutral representation accounted for about one-third of all the strategies used in both posts and threads, showing the neutral side in the discourse of some employers asking factual questions or making fair descriptions of DMWs.

Aside from the neutral representation, the strategies used the most in posts and threads are Othering and shaming, Othering and criticizing the government, Othering and genderization, and Othering and racialization.

The fact of both Othering and shaming and Othering and criticizing the government together taking up 38% and 40% in posts and threads, respectively, however, showcased a tendency of the othering strategies favored by most of the Taiwanese employers in the Facebook group.

New Strategies Found in This Research

For the second question, when reviewing the three othering strategies proposed by Ladegaard (2022), which are Othering and shaming, Othering and racialization, and Othering and morality, it can be found that different strategies used exclusively by Taiwanese employers did exist. These strategies included Othering and criticizing the government, Othering and genderization, Othering and comforting other employers, Othering and blaming agents, Non-othering and neutral representation, and Non-othering and positive representation.

How Gender, Sexuality, Race, and Capital Were Represented in the Chosen Discourse

To answer this question, it is important to address the question in two different aspects. The first aspect pointed to the fact that for gender, sexuality, and race, corresponding strategies for each concept were spotted in Taiwanese employers' discourse in the open Facebook group, which are Othering and genderization, Othering and sexual morality, and Othering and racialization. With different operational definitions, each strategy functioned to attack on one side of DMW's otherness at one time. Moreover, during the othering process, capital also played an important role.

Judging from a macro point of view, the differences of capital power lying in between Taiwan and those countries from which most of the DMWs came led to the first layer of othering, framing these workers as the outgroup members. Later, with DMWs' identity as workers belonging to the subordinate position in the employer-worker hierarchy, DMWs' second-class image with limited capital power and mobility was further strengthened as the second layer of othering.

Thus, when capital interacted with the other elements, such as gender, sexuality, and race in the othering process of DMWs, it is observed that this kind of process is usually complicated

with different elements intertwined with each other, making every one of them nearly inseparable from each other.

On the other hand, the other more interesting aspect, as presumed in the research question, is that the mixed and overlapping use of these strategies was commonly observed in the employers' discourse. When analyzing the relation between strategies used in posts and threads, not only a change of the strategies used can be found, but also an intersectionality of the strategies adopted in a single thread responding to the post. In many of the cases displayed, the mixed use of over one othering strategy at one time effectively increased the complexity of each discourse.

Conclusion

Significant Findings

Compared with the most recent study by Ladegaard (2022) on the representation of DMWs by employers in Hong Kong on social media, some important and new aspects observed in this research is that for Taiwanese employers, 1) different and new othering strategies were used because of different social and political context; 2) the complexity of the Taiwanese discourse seemed to be higher with the adoption of multiple strategies at one time.

As mentioned in the previous section, in this research, new strategies used to represent DMWs on social media that has never been proposed by existing research included Othering and criticizing the government, Othering and genderization, Othering and comforting other employers, Othering and blaming agents, Non-othering and neutral representation, and Non-othering and positive representation.

With the identification of these new categories, even when Taiwan and Hong Kong were both Asian countries with a similar population composition in terms of ethnicity, it can be inferred that, with a different social and political background, the representation and narrating style of DMWs can be very different in different countries.

Second, while in the research of Ladegaard (2022), DMWs were often negatively portrayed and targeted with one strategy and one aspect at one time; in this research, an intersectional characteristic can be found in the discourse built up by Taiwanese employers. Under the Taiwanese context, with the slightly higher protection for DMWs from the government compared with other countries (Rich et al., 2022) because of the more friendly attitude from the ruling party DPP, the othering strategies were not limited to individual behaviors anymore, but toward the government, the agents, and basically the society as a whole.

In the discourse built by Taiwanese employers, blame of different parties and players in the DMW domain can usually be found. As in the research of Ladegaard (2022), personal insults and blaming of DMWs themselves for various reasons were clearly presented; this research displayed a similar phenomenon, but also with the resentful narrating style specifically belonging to the Taiwanese discourse.

Limitations

One of the major limitations of this research is not being able to present a complete picture of the social media landscape regarding how DMWs were represented online in Taiwan. Although

different kinds of voices speaking for migrant workers' rights or appealing to the public's empathy for these workers do exist, they could not be included in this research because of the limitations of the research scale. While this research might be a stepping stone for future research regarding the social media representation phenomenon of Southeast Asian migrant workers, I strongly encourage future research to choose a Facebook fan page or group with a positive narrating style to explore how those accounts constructed their representation of migrant workers in contrast to the one chosen in this research.

During the analysis phase, when comparing the frequency of both topics discussed and strategies used in posts and threads, some patterns in which certain kinds of topics discussed possibly lead to certain types of strategies used were observed. However, while the nature of this research's method is a mixed one that is slightly oriented toward the qualitative path, the more advanced statistical analysis techniques could not be applied due to space limitations. Thus, if future research decides to set their scope as similar to this one, a more statistical research method can be adopted to provide readers with the correlations between topics discussed and representation strategies used by employers on social media.

The very last limitation lies in this research is the choosing of the target country in which the discourse was taking place. As the political environment in Taiwan is now considered to be rather friendly to DMWs with regulations loosening compared to the past, the policies in other countries, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and South Korea, dealing with this area can differ greatly, and might have a great influence on how discourse around this area is constructed. Therefore, I also encouraged future research to set their research scope across the Asian countries that are adopting or about to adopt the system of hiring DMWs in their countries, so as to see if different social and political environments can lead to a diversified representation of these workers.

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