Article

Restoration of positive self-image: Ideological circles in the mediatization of government-migrant worker relations during Covid 19

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Abstract
This article focuses on migrant workers (MWs) during Covid-19 in Singapore. A second wave of Covid-19 transmissions in MW dormitories in 2020 had cast a spotlight on this vulnerable population, amidst inter/national criticisms of the national government for oversight. From a critical discourse studies perspective, we examine how the national newspaper attempted to restore a positive self-image of the Singapore government, through the discursive mobilization of 'ideological circles'. These ideological circles involve, variously, positive and negative discursive presentational strategies of the Singapore government, its MWs, selected regional governments, and their MWs. The study unpacks the ideological mechanisms at work in the restoration of the government's reputation as well as examines the implications for MWs in Singapore as perpetual 'others'.

Keywords
Covid-19 pandemic, ideological circles, mediatization, migrant workers, restoration of positive self-image, the Singapore government

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Introduction

Initially identified at the end of 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic had recorded close to 652 million case transmissions, with global fatalities in excess of 6.6 million as at 23 December 2022 (World Health Organization, 2022). Different countries resorted to a range of measures to curb the spread of Covid-19 due to human-to-human transmission (Chakraborty and Maity, 2020; Liu and Zhang, 2020). Some of these efforts included social distancing, lockdowns, mask wearing, border controls, and home quarantine orders for those in contact with likely carriers. One of the main complexities in arresting the infection rates of Covid-19 was that asymptomatic carriers could go unnoticed (Sun and Weng, 2020; Yu and Yang, 2020). Compounded by the mutation of the Covid-19 virus and slow vaccine rollout rates at the beginning, countries endeavoured to flatten infection curves to alleviate pressures on their local health systems.

While this global pandemic captured the attention and national responses around the world, the plight of migrant workers (MWs) appears to have been marginalized during these unprecedented times (Karim et al., 2020; Kumar and Choudhury, 2021). This could be explained by the lack of access to national healthcare systems or medical assistance due to non-residency status or inadequate employment protection allotted to precocious work environments. In Singapore, a second wave of Covid-19 transmissions in 2020 had cast a spotlight on the vulnerability of the MW population, inviting negative international media attention (Leung, 2020; Sim and Kok, 2020; Yeung et al., 2020). This article shows how *The Straits Times* (ST), the national newspaper known for its pro-government partisanship, chose to represent government-MW relations in Singapore when the second wave transmissions emerged within MW clusters. ST's mediatization practice reveals the discursive reconstruction of a positive self-image for the Singapore government from widespread negative publicity.

Migrant workers in Singapore

The island state of Singapore is one of the smallest in the world, yet enjoys a strong international reputation of economic prosperity, world-class education and healthcare systems, and strong, efficient governance since gaining independence in 1965 (Dimmock and Tan, 2016; Henderson, 2012; Quah, 2018). Contributing to the success of the Singapore story is the migrant labour force, which is often classified into three main groups – those that work in the professional, white-collared jobs such as finance and information technology; domestic helpers within households; and an even larger proportion devoted to the construction labour workforce. In Singapore, the terms 'migrant worker' or 'foreign worker' commonly refer to the latter two categories of the blue-collared labour force, distinguished from 'foreign talent', a term reserved for the white-collared 'expatriate' workforce. These groups are managed via different work permit mechanisms. Of the close to one million work permits issued to the foreign workforce in 2019, 25% were issued to domestic helpers, while almost 30% were issued to workers in the construction industry (Ministry of Manpower, 2021), thereby illuminating the key roles that the migrant workforce plays in terms of home environments and construction, respectively. The focus in this study is on the MWs in the construction sector, who constituted a significant 'transmission cluster' during the pandemic in 2020.

MW relations before and during Covid-19

Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 in Singapore, MW relations were mostly approached from a governance framework, which involved the regulation of MW mobilities across home countries (e.g. Bangladesh, India, Myanmar) to Singapore, and how these arrangements are often undertaken by agents with employers about their work or living environments (Huang and Yeoh, 2003; Low, 2002; Marti, 2019). The government's policy is opposed to granting long term residency to MWs, who are perceived to be potentially disruptive to Singaporean society if not tightly regulated, and so they are rendered a perpetually transient workforce, subject to repatriation (Yeoh, 2006). Other studies adopted from the perspectives of MW experiences reveal low-wage environments, and illuminate their vulnerabilities, such as when falling sick or being injured at work, and the grey area surrounding worker compensation entitlements (Bal, 2015; Devasahayam, 2010; Piper, 2006).

MW communities support one another as they are unlikely to have relatives in Singapore (Peth et al., 2018; Thompson, 2009; Ueno, 2009), thus creating informal friendship ties where communal meals, celebration of religious festivals, and grocery shopping and social gathering on weekends form their social networks. MWs from South Asia often congregate in Little India, a precinct that caters to their common interests such as food or music. A highly popular weekend locality for MWs, buses are chartered to take construction workers from their dormitories to Little India and back at the end of the day. The precinct became notorious for a rare riot that occurred on 8 December 2013, where a group of MWs were in affray with police officers, resulting in one death, more than 60 arrests, and estimated damages to private property amounting to US$380,000 (Loong, 2018). Media analysts had noted the existence of ethnic stereotypes regarding disorderly and drunken behaviour among this group of minorities, which called for increased surveillance of the precinct (Hamid, 2015; Soh, 2001).

This study turns the spotlight to developments in government-MW relations, particularly in the period of the second wave of Covid-19 transmissions in Singapore. Prior to April 2020, Singapore was heralded as the poster child for successfully managing the Covid-19 pandemic due to its rigorous testing and contact tracing efforts to curb the spread of the virus. However, the situation escalated in April when a second wave of transmissions emerged in the country, this time concentrated in a range of MW dormitories. To put things in perspective, 38,829 out of the 41, 216 total number of Covid-19 cases in Singapore (94.2%) had occurred within the MW dormitories in the second quarter of 2020. Foreign articles on Singapore's downward turn revealed the deplorable living and working conditions of MWs, pointing to the lack of attention given by employers and government agencies to their health and safety needs. The foreign press cited 'overcrowded living quarters, hazardous working conditions, low pay and often limited access to social protections' (Leung, 2020) and 'poor living conditions in some dormitories, ranging from kitchens infested with cockroaches to overflowing urinals' (Sim and Kok, 2020), as various reasons leading to the coronavirus outbreak in the dormitories. *Time* magazine voiced alarm over the situation using such expressions as 'a time bomb waiting to explode' and the 'largest humanitarian public health crisis ever'. In our study, how the national newspaper represented favourably on the government's swift response to this 'humanitarian public health crisis' is examined.

Presentational strategies: From ideological square to ideological circles

In media and other representations of intergroup relations involving ethnic minorities and migrant populations, a polarizing ideological structure between 'Us' and 'Them' has been well documented in critical discourse studies (e.g. KhosraviNik, 2009; Reisigl and Wodak, 2000; van Dijk, 2011). As part of an overall strategy of ideological communication about social groups, van Dijk (2000, 2011) refers to an 'ideological square' that is, a discursive mechanism which regulates the expression or suppression of positive and negative information about 'us' and 'others', in the self-interest of dominant groups. The ideological square comprises four complementary moves, visually represented below:

Emphasise *Our* good things	Emphasise *Their* bad things
De-emphasise *Our* bad things	De-emphasise *Their* good things

(reproduced from van Dijk, 2011: 396)

These moves constitute discursive strategies of 'positive self-presentation' and 'negative other-presentation'. The assumption underlying these ideological representations is that in-group members tend to speak positively about their own group, and negatively about out-group members perceived, and construed, as different from 'ourselves'. Although the polarization between Us and Others is pervasive in ideological communication generally, van Dijk (2011) notes that it is especially pronounced in racist, nationalist, and political-economic ideologies.

Strategic linguistic choices are made in discourse that highlight Our good actions and attributes and Their negative actions and attributes. A range of diverse semantic structures may be mobilized, albeit calibrated differently depending on the construction of a positive self-presentation or a negative other-presentation. The semantic structures include choice of topics, level of description (generality to specificity), degree of completeness and granularity (preciseness vs vagueness), implications of propositions, modality, agency and responsibility, and focus given to particular attributes or actions of 'ours'/'theirs' (van Dijk, 2011: 397). The significance of regularly making such strategic choices lies in the potential to influence the social cognitions of readers.

Studies have shown that in circumstances of credibility risk, government institutions use presentational strategies for blame avoidance (Hansson, 2015; Hood, 2011). This research focuses on how the national media uses presentational strategies to recover a favourable self-image of the government in the face of reputational harm from its failure to anticipate and contain the outbreak among its MW population. Reconstructing a positive self-image, with the goal of achieving reputational recovery, constitutes a meta-pragmatic strategy in the news articles of this study. Central to this are positive self-presentational moves about government-migrant relations in Singapore, where, as van Dijk (1995: 32) puts it, 'we find that preferred, consistent or otherwise self-serving information will be emphasized, highlighted, focused upon, and made explicit and prominent, whereas the converse is true for dispreferred information'. In the period of the study, ST selectively highlighted news stories that demonstrated the government's attentiveness towards the vulnerable MW community following the outbreak of the coronavirus in the dormitories. The attentiveness by the authorities is a necessary response to address and safeguard the

welfare of MWs, protect the national health security, and demonstrate strong governance to a watching national and international audience.

Although MWs, for all intents and purposes, remain an 'othered' category in Singapore, under the circumstances of the government's patent mismanagement of their safety at the height of the Covid pandemic and the obvious sympathies of the inter/national audience towards the MW community, negative other-presentation moves of MWs by ST are avoided. Instead, as will be shown, MWs in Singapore are represented positively in the press as responsive to government efforts to help them tide through the pandemic. Such a portrayal, in turn, bolsters the meta-pragmatic construction of the positive self-image of the local government.

Negative other-presentation moves, however, are re-directed at neighbouring governments, positioned, for present purposes, in the slot of 'Others', for their failures to manage the Covid crisis. In this way, the Singapore government's own previous short-sightedness is mitigated, as well as their positive image, by contrast to the failure of Others, is enhanced. Unlike situations where national Others are typically viewed as enemies, competitors, or threats to Self (van Dijk, 2011), in the present case, other nations are set up as 'deflectors' of criticism from Self.

In recovering a positive self-image for the Singapore government, then, ST mobilizes what can be termed as 'ideological circles', whereby multiple and tiered relations of self- and other-presentational activity are at work (see Figure 1). Positive Self-presentation of the Singapore government is at the core, while regional governments (and 'their' MWs) constitute polarized projected 'Others' (big 'O'). MWs in Singapore occupy a discursive space of 'other' (small 'o') between Self and Others, and not negativized – but positivized – under present circumstances.
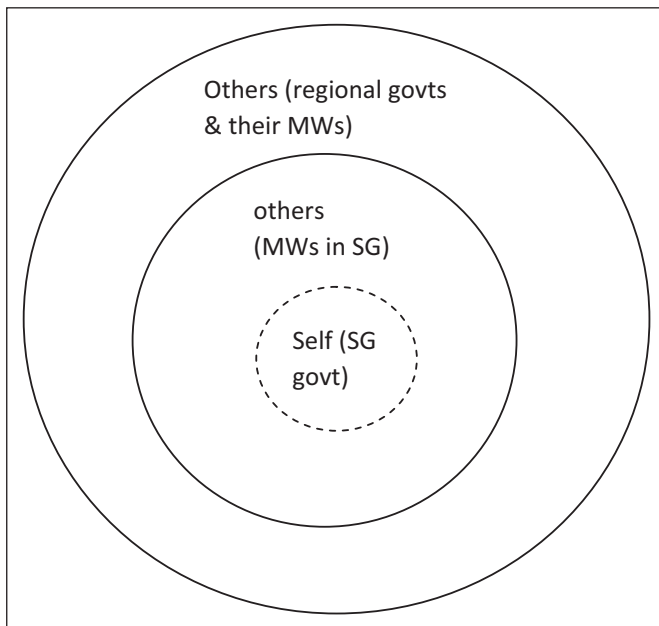
Figure 1. Ideological circles of 'self' & 'O/others'.

Positive self-image recovery in *The Straits Times*

The corpus for this study comprises 56 ST newspaper articles from February to June 2020, collected from Factiva, which contained key terms 'migrant workers' and 'Covid-19'. April 2020 was the month that the second wave of Covid-19 transmissions in MWs' dormitories had emerged. The dataset includes news discourse in April as well as 2 months prior and 2 months after this episode had peaked. The articles or segments of the articles were grouped based on recurrent discursive themes. From this grouping, two observations were made: first, the majority of articles were about Singapore's relations with MWs, of which two groups of actors from Singapore were involved – government and non-government actors (NGOs, companies and individual citizens); second, ST ran a few articles on how other countries were dealing with the pandemic in general, and on regional neighbours' relations with their migrant populations in particular. The focus in this article is on mediatized government-migrant relations in Singapore and in the region during the period of study, and applying the emergent discursive themes from the articles to flesh out the meta-pragmatic strategy of recovering a positive government self-image in a time of reputational damage. In the analytical section below, the positive self-presentation themes associated with local government-migrant relations are discussed, followed by the negative other-presentation themes pertaining to regional government-migrant relations, both accompanied by illustrative examples.

Positive self-presentation of Singapore's government-migrant relations

The articles in this section mainly show the responsiveness of government authorities in the wake of the virus outbreak in MW clusters in April 2020. The themes identified from the ST articles are (i) the government's forthrightness and manifest transparency in responding to criticisms; (ii) its operational efficiency in handling the virus outbreak; (iii) its investment efforts in curbing the infections; (iv) demonstration of a caring stance; and (v) how local MWs are cast in a favourable light.

Forthrightness and transparency of government actions

In the face of public criticisms over governmental inaction or poor decision-making dealing with the virus outbreak in the migrant dormitories, ST presents the authorities as ostensibly forthright and transparent in answering, rather than evading, the complaints. The answers indicate the practical difficulties and complex considerations that need to be weighed, preventing the government from attaining certain ideal outcomes demanded by the public. Faults priorly attributed to the government, therefore, are explained away:

(1) There has been some discussion on whether the authorities should have tested foreign workers earlier, to contain the spread of Covid-19. Mrs Teo then Manpower Minister said MOM [Ministry of Manpower] had sent out an advisory in February to ask employers not to send workers who are healthy for testing [. . .] 'Why? Because at that time, healthy workers were going to hospitals in droves to ask for tests. The worry was that thousands would show up and overwhelm healthcare workers', she explained. (ST April 25, 2020)

(2)   Mrs Teo wrote: 'If we act fast, we're aware there's little time for employers to adjust. If we act too slowly, there is risk of wider transmission. This is the difficult trade-of' [. . .]. Given how quickly and widely the virus spreads, can we afford to wait? If there's anything we have learnt about the virus, taking action sooner is probably better than later', Mrs Teo said. (ST April 25, 2020)

(3)   Standards are to be raised - but to what levels? Give these MWs quarters on a par with our national servicemen's bunks? Give them HDB flats to live in? House them, as now, in resorts, hotel-style accommodation, cruise ships? But this ignores the reality that life is unequal. Not everyone lives in a Sentosa Cove bungalow with a private pool that one can still swim in during the circuit breaker period. (ST May 10, 2020)

Extract (1) presents a response to criticisms of governmental inaction towards early testing of MWs; extract (2) responds to frustrations with respect to the short notice granted to employers to suspend construction work; while extract (3) is in response to criticisms concerning the physical conditions of quarantine facilities provided to MWs as a consequence of the virus outbreak in the dormitories. In all three situations, government authorities are shown engaging with the criticisms and explaining their (in)actions in a forthright manner. In (1), a projected dialogic question-and-answer format ('Why? Because') is taken in elucidating the strain on the existing healthcare capacity. Fear of large numbers of healthy MWs burdening the medical system is expressed through adjectival expressions 'in droves' and 'thousands'. In the case of (2), the minister is quoted as describing the dilemma of timing as a 'difficult trade-off' faced by the government when implementing measures. While the situations described in (1) and (2) have had accompanying ramifications, the decisions made by the government are construed to have resulted from a process of careful evaluation. In (1), disclosure of a government 'advisory' issued months earlier ('in February') reveals a concerted decision by the government. In (2), the calculated decision to quickly implement new measures is reportedly motivated by lessons from the past (i.e. 'taking action sooner is probably better than later') and through a rhetorical question justifying the government's move ('can we afford to wait?'). These extracts essentially serve to cushion the blame by framing governmental action as the outcomes of complex considerations rather than as simply negligent or precipitous.

Extract (3), while beginning ostensibly from a stance of consensus ('standards are to be raised') confronts readers, instead, with structural inequality as an undisputed social fact. The series of rhetorical questions positions readers in the shoes of the government to navigate conundrums that reveal the disparity between public expectations of ideal outcomes (e.g. sanitation and living standards for MWs) and limits of socio-economic reality. Among the conundrums presented is the reality of the 'othered' MW, who is denied eligibility for similar 'levels' of accommodation reserved exclusively for citizens ('our national servicemen's bunks'; 'HDB [public housing] flats'). The use of rhetorical questions renders the disparity as obvious, and in case it is not, the presence of the adversative conjunction, followed by statements of fact ('the reality that life is unequal') and hyperbole ('Not everyone lives in a Sentosa Cove bungalow with a private pool') drives home the point. While on the one hand, the government risks coming across as patronizing and elitist, on the other hand, it reinforces the unapologetically pragmatic stance for which the Singapore government is well-known and, arguably,

admired. Moreover, the government's response construes those advocating better outcomes for MWs as idealistic and ignorant of practical realities, thus undermining their moral high ground.

Operational efficiency of the government

While explaining away criticisms serves as a strategy to mitigate blame, the foregrounding of the instrumental role played by the government to improve MW welfare simultaneously constitutes the move of emphasizing positive self-presentation of the local authorities. Information about the government's methodical and efficient handling of the virus outbreak among the MW community is accorded prominence in the ST articles:

(4)   Mr Iswaran [then Minister for Communications and Information] said: 'I think anxiety is inevitable. Wherever these clusters emerge, I think there's anxiety. That is why we have a very clear protocol on how to manage them. First, in identifying the source during the contact tracing, and then taking other appropriate measures, whether it is quarantine orders, closing down the relevant area for thorough cleaning et cetera'. (ST April 5, 2020)

(5)   MOM [Ministry of Manpower] has deployed teams on the ground to ensure workers monitor their temperature twice daily and wear masks when they step out of their rooms to collect meals or use the washroom. (ST April 8, 2020)

(6)   Addressing the impact on migrant workers, [Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong] said the Government will step up medical resources in dorms to protect the health of the workers. This includes housing mild coronavirus cases either on-site, in a separate facility within the dorm, or in community care facilities elsewhere. And he added that the Government will make sure that those who need active treatment receive immediate attention and are sent promptly to hospital. (ST April 22, 2020)

Operational efficiency of the government is demonstrated by detailing a range of specific responses that have been initiated to curb infections among MWs. Excerpt (4) outlines a planned sequence of procedures ('First', 'and then') to minimize the spread of infection. The explication of particular procedures, described categorically as 'a very clear protocol', is shown to ameliorate the anxiety caused by the emergence of Covid-19 clusters. At the same time as presenting the government as taking control of the situation, the government's responsibility for causing the anxiety in the first place, is obscured. The nominalization of anxiety is rendered both matter-of-factly (see the adjective 'inevitable' and the existential clause 'there's anxiety') as well as a matter of speculative personal opinion of the minister (see repetition of 'I think'). In (5), actual measures 'on the ground' undertaken to contain the outbreak, through deployment of dedicated personnel demonstrate the resoluteness of the government to enforce health protocols. Attention to further health measures is expounded in (6), which appear to be in response to ongoing criticisms of indiscriminate quarantining of all MWs – infected and uninfected – within the same quarters. The repeated use of the modal 'will', then, suggests commitment to future remedial action by 'the Government', positioned agentively in the clauses. The words 'immediate' and 'promptly', moreover, connote urgency or priority in providing medical treatment to affected MWs. Altogether, these extracts recuperatively portray the government as responsively intervening, with requisite resources in place, in unfavourable circumstances.

In addition to the clear procedural handling of the virus outbreak, the situation on the ground is also depicted to have improved vastly:

(7)   After some initial hitches, dormitory residents are now able to receive their meals in a timely and orderly fashion, said MOM. (ST April 8, 2020)

(8)   'We experienced teething problems with the portions, suitability and distribution', the ministry said, adding that these issues have been progressively resolved. Multiple professional caterers have been engaged to ensure residents get three proper meals a day. To date, the caterers have delivered over 65,000 portions of food and snacks. (ST April 7, 2020)

(9)   S11 Dormitories managing director Johnathan Cheah said he had added 10 more cleaners to the Punggol site and 'the situation has vastly improved over the past 24 hours'. (ST April 7, 2020)

Where criticisms were previously directed at the government for overlooking the quality and hygiene of the provisions available to MWs (such as food and living quarters), (7) and (8) allude to these criticisms as simply 'initial hitches' or 'teething problems', which downplay both the severity of criticisms received and the government's oversight. Instead, (7) to (9) emphasize the progress achieved, which highlights the increased efforts of those in authority. In other words, these news articles simultaneously suppress negative information about the Singapore government whilst emphasizing positive ones in handling the virus outbreak among MWs.

Government's invested efforts

In addition to the responsive operational efficiency of the government, ST articles also portray local authorities as committed and invested in the welfare of MWs. One way this is emphasized is by depicting the reach and extent of the efforts taken to ensure MWs' welfare:

(10)   The inter-agency task force will be working more closely with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) [. . .] to provide support to foreign workers and dormitory operators [. . .]. For instance, more than 5,000 foreign worker ambassadors from MWC [Migrant Workers Centre] have been tapped to disseminate information to foreign workers and relay their feedback. (ST April 19, 2020)

(11)   MOM has deployed teams on the ground to ensure workers monitor their temperature twice daily and wear masks when they step out of their rooms to collect meals or use the washroom. These teams are supported by the Ministry of Health, National Environment Agency, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), the Singapore Police Force, Migrant Workers Centre and other agencies. (ST April 8, 2020)

(12)   The taskforce is also working with NGOs such as the Alliance of Guest Workers Outreach, Itsrainingraincoats, Geylang Adventures and Crisis Relief Alliance to reach out to more foreign workers. [. . .] the task force is working with charity HealthServe to provide free virtual counselling sessions by 69 volunteers. (ST April 19, 2020)

A common theme across (10) to (12) pertains to the extensive collaborations among government agencies and non-government entities, to ensure that migrant welfare needs are met. The scale of their efforts is foregrounded by highlighting numerically the personnel involved ('more than 5000 foreign worker ambassadors'), as well as the mobilization of numerous individually-named participating agencies. Where the contributions of NGOs are noted in (12), the government and its task force is clearly positioned as the nucleus coordinating this operation, with the NGOs as subsidiary participants. Actively working with NGOs reflects on the operational efficiency and resourcefulness of the government in liaising with other groups to tackle a major crisis.

In addition to the extensive coordination between various agencies, the commitment towards MW welfare is also accentuated by the painstaking efforts invested by the government. Adjectival expressions 'enormous undertaking' (13) and 'working round the clock' (14) emphasize the seriousness of the government's commitment to address the virus outbreak in the migrant dormitories. The conjunction in (13) ('workers as well as the community') is noteworthy for two reasons. First, the implication is that the invested effort, while benefitting the MWs, has necessary pay-offs for the health and safety of the wider Singaporean community. And second, while workers and 'the community' will both be protected, it is telling that MWs are a separate group, and not part of Us.

(13)   [The Ministry of Manpower] added that gazetting the dorms was an enormous undertaking, to protect the health and safety of the workers as well as the community. This also built on precautions that had been progressively implemented at dormitories since the outbreak of Covid-19. (ST April 7, 2020)

(14)   In an update yesterday on the condition of the dormitories, the ministry said its officers have been working round the clock with the operators. (ST April 7, 2020)

The investment of the government is further demonstrated through the deployment of ministers personally on the ground.

(15)   Minister of State for Manpower Zaqy Mohamad and Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Manpower Low Yen Ling visited PPT Lodge 1A in Punggol during the distribution of the first Ramadan meal to Muslim migrant workers living there. (ST April 24, 2020)

(16)   Speaking to reporters after a 30-minute dialogue with foreign workers at a dormitory in Jurong, Mr Iswaran [then Minister for Communications and Information] said the Government's top concern is their health and well-being, along with that of Singapore residents [. . .] He spoke with about 50 workers from Westlite Papan dormitory in an engagement session, which was also attended by Minister of State for Manpower Zaqy Mohamad. (ST April 5, 2020)

(17)   Speaking with reporters after a visit to Westlite Papan dormitory in the Jurong area, Mr Shanmugam [Minister for Home Affairs and Law] said the purpose of his visit was to hear from the workers, to understand their concerns and to give

assurance. [. . .] Mr Shanmugam, who spoke in Tamil and English to more than 70 workers, told them that the Covid-19 outbreak was happening in other countries as well and sought their understanding for the current measures being implemented. (ST April 22, 2020)

Government ministers are shown engaging directly with MWs in the dormitories: visiting Muslim workers on a significant religious occasion (15); speaking to workers at a '30-minute dialogue session' (16); and hearing 'from the workers, to understand their concerns and to give assurance' (17). The latter, in particular, presents the government as receptive and willing to listen, while at the same time seeking cooperation from MWs on government measures. Quantifying the numbers of workers spoken with directly ('about 50' and 'more than 70' workers), and naming specific dormitories visited ('PPT Lodge 1A in Punggol'; 'Westlite Papan dormitory in the Jurong area') reflect the exceptional attention dedicated to the welfare of MWs on the ground. Attendance of both Muslim and non-Muslim ministers in (15), furthermore communicates the government's sensitivity to the religious lives of its MWs, while in (17) attempts by the government to connect with MWs through linguistic accommodation are depicted. The deployment of an ethnic Indian minister to the Westlite Papan dormitory appears not only strategic, given the prominence of Indian MWs in Singapore, but attention is also drawn to the minister's choice of language ('Tamil and English' – with Tamil given precedence) at the event, emphasizing the government's sincerity in trying to understand – and be understood by – the workers. Notwithstanding the favourable presentation of government officials in these extracts, a '30-minute dialogue' (15) and ministers speaking to rather small groups of workers (16 and 17) appear to be public performative gestures of personalized interest and commitment to an aggrieved community, serving to tone down the effect of an otherwise impersonal and top-down bureaucratic relationship between unequal parties.

A caring government

Apart from outreach events, the government is portrayed as benevolent through a 'language of care', which gives importance to MWs' holistic well-being.

(18) 'To our MWs, let me emphasize again, we will care for you like we care for Singaporeans', [Prime Minister Lee] said. He thanked them for their cooperation and assured them that their health, welfare and livelihood will be taken care of, including making sure they get paid, can send money home, and helping them stay in touch with friends and family. (ST April 21, 2020)

(19) The video by SingHealth assured workers that the Government will pay for their hospital costs related to Covid-19, that their employers will continue to pay their salaries, and that they will not lose their jobs. (ST April 19, 2020)

(20) In a video posted on Facebook yesterday, Manpower Minister Josephine Teo urged MWs to see a doctor if they are unwell, stay in their rooms, keep in touch with others through the Wi-Fi and data SIM cards they have been provided with, and maintain personal hygiene. (ST April 19, 2020)

In the 'language of care', MWs are addressed by government officials either face-to-face (18) or via video posts (19 and 20). This has the discursive effect of integrating MWs into the broader national Covid-19 discourse, by acknowledging and positioning them as victims affected by the pandemic (as opposed to an overlooked group as before). Example (18), like (13) and (16) earlier, while emphasizing similarity of commitment to MWs ('we will care for you like we care for Singaporeans'), simultaneously implies that 'they' are not actually 'us' (i.e. citizens). In an act of benign othering, 'they' are credited positively with cooperative behaviour, as mentioned in the minister's statement of thanks. In the 'language of care', both health and economic welfare of MWs are emphasized, with the government repeatedly assuring them that their Covid-related needs are provided for. Care is also extended to their mental and emotional wellness through provision of 'Wi-Fi and data SIM cards' (22) to stay socially connected. Also, in (14) earlier, the government is represented as actively arranging 'free virtual counselling sessions' for MWs. Essentially, then, the exercise of care towards MWs not only construes local authorities as responsible, but also reveals a humane side of the government as caring for these workers, holistically, as human beings.

The portrayal of a caring government is further demonstrated by extending the nation's legal infrastructure as protection for MWs against exploitative or discriminatory practices:

(21) [Mr Shanmugam] also asked the workers to report to the authorities if their employers do not pay them. (ST April 22, 2020)

(22) A dormitory operator who forcibly confined 20 workers in a locked room has been given a stern warning by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM). The workers' employer will also be barred from hiring new foreign staff pending a police investigation, the ministry said yesterday. (ST April 25, 2020)

(23) Meanwhile, the police also said on Saturday that they are investigating a 34-year-old man for promoting enmity between different racial groups. Police had received a report linked to offensive content against Indian migrant workers posted by a Twitter user [. . .] (ST April 25, 2020)

Following assurances that MWs will continue to be paid during the pandemic, as mentioned earlier, example (21) depicts the government offering MWs legal support against exploitative employers. Such protection is further manifested in (22) and (23) in the form of legal sanctions and investigations against Singaporean offenders. Discursively, this achieves two goals. First, it reiterates the commitment of the government to safeguard vulnerable MWs, and its willingness to impose punitive measures against offenders. Second, it reinforces earlier statements by the government towards benevolent care for MWs as though they were Singaporeans; any offenders – even if they were Singaporeans – would therefore be punished equally for ill-treating MWs.

Responsibility and compliance of our MWs

In addition to positivizing government actions, ST articles also favourably represented MWs in Singapore. The articles highlighted the opinions of MWs, who welcomed the

safety health measures implemented by the Singapore government. Because these measures affected MWs most adversely, MWs themselves served to assuage public concerns advocating for their rights and freedoms:

(24)   'It's safer that we don't meet, and my brother knows it's important that we keep ourselves healthy', said the safety officer, who has worked here for 11 years. 'This is how we can help fight Covid-19', said Mr Ahmed, whose brother Ahmed Jabed, 25, works as an electrician. (ST April 3, 2020)

(25)   While news of dorm clusters has caused some anxiety in the community, Mr Ayyappan reminds his friends that measures such as social distancing and good hygiene can keep them safe [. . .]Mr Ayyappan said: 'The rules are there to protect us, but we also need to do something to take care of ourselves. This means we don't go out on weekends if we don't need to'. (ST April 3, 2020)

(26)   A few days ago, he received a call from a friend who lives in the Westlite Toh Guan dormitory, following news that some of its residents had tested positive for the virus. 'He was very worried, but I told him that he just has to be responsible and follow the measures in place', said Mr Ahmed, noting that Singapore's healthcare facilities are among the best in the world. (ST April 3, 2020)

Through perspectivization, authenticity of emotions and views of MWs are achieved in these examples. Although their fears are expressed at the virus outbreak in the dormitories ('some anxiety' (25), 'very worried' (26)), they are mostly depicted as civic-minded in exercising self-responsibility within small community circles (between siblings or friends) in the situation. The extracts exemplify MWs' support for the government's safety measures, in their willingness to forgo their social activities to minimize the risk of transmissions. This softens the public's perception of hardship faced by MWs in adhering to mandatory procedures. In fact, a theme of freely exercised self-care is evident in the discourse of the MWs in (24) and (25): 'it's important we keep ourselves healthy'; and 'The rules are there to protect us, but we also need to take care of ourselves', respectively. At the very least, compliance with the government's safety measures is equated as being 'responsible' (in 26). In sum, the positive other-representation of migrants contributes indirectly to Singapore's own positive self-image.

The positivization of local MWs is further seen in (27) and (28).

(27)   [Mr Shanmugam] said: "It's tough to be cut off and be in a room most of the time, but they understand. Their main request is they hope after this is over, they will be allowed to work in Singapore. (ST April 22, 2020)

(28)   Yesterday, the workers asked questions about whether they may lose their jobs as a result of this pandemic, if other workers who are overseas can return to Singapore to work, and how they can help in the national effort to fight the virus. (ST April 5, 2020)

The point about compliance and responsibility is reiterated in (27), where in spite of foregrounding the hardships of being quarantined, the adversative conjunction introduces a clause of worker acquiescence ('but they understand'). (See also their cooperative behaviour in 18). Even more impressive is the way they are presented in (28) as eager to 'help in the national effort to fight the virus'. In deploying the combative metaphor 'fight the virus', MWs are portrayed as being on the same side as Singaporeans in this 'war' against Covid-19. The phrase 'the national effort', seems to suggest that from the perspective of MWs, there is no 'them' and 'us' in this common fight. While MWs are depicted favourably in these ways, (27) and (28) also belie their social inequality and economic precarity that seem to underlie their compliant, cooperative, and even nationalistic stance. Their adherence to the health measures seems to be in exchange for continued employment in Singapore, which is 'their main request'. As much as this positions Singapore as a desirable site of employment, it also conveys the earnestness of transient workers to remain in Singapore.

Negative other-presentation of regional government-migrant relations

In contrast to the Singapore government's responsiveness to the situation, the ST articles during this period also carried several reports of the failure of neighbouring governments to respond to Covid-related migrant management problems in their countries. When the virus transmission in Singapore's migrant dormitories had escalated, the publishing of articles that highlighted neighbouring countries' mishandling of their migrant situations could be seen as strategic. Partly, this helped to deflect the weight of criticism away from the local government, and to contrast with Singapore's subsequent strong measures in addressing the welfare of its MW population. In this section, the negativization of regional government-migrant relations under the emergent themes of other governments' lack of foresight and responsibility; their inability to cope with the health crisis; and negativization of 'their' MWs are discussed.

Regional governments' lack of responsibility

Articles reporting on regional neighbours handling of MWs during Covid-19 implicitly criticized their governments' poor responses to crisis management. Thailand, was singled out for repeated mention in ST:

  (29) Thailand, which had kept its doors open in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, was now struggling to contain the number of local transmissions. (ST April 10, 2020)
  (30) Thailand's lockdown has sent thousands of its migrant workers across borders, potentially seeding new clusters of infection. (ST April 10, 2020)

Thailand's policies are represented as lacking foresight, with direct consequences on the uncontrolled outbreak of the Covid-19 virus nationally and, more damningly, potentially

exporting the transmission regionally by causing mass migration of foreign workers during the pandemic. The two extracts together reflect a timeline which traces Thailand's prior open-borders policy ('in the early days'), present consequences ('now struggling'), its ensuing lockdown measures, and future regional ramifications of those measures ('potentially seeding new clusters') 'across borders'.

Thailand is also criticized for creating a situation of extreme vulnerability through inadequate social provision for its MWs (unlike Singapore) as well as exacerbating the plight of workers returning to their home communities:

(31) These migrants, who build houses, clean homes, as well as perform a variety of other jobs often on informal terms with little social protection, could not survive in Bangkok once the authorities abruptly pulled the plug on commercial life without offering any alternative income support. (ST April 10, 2020)

(32) Myanmar, meanwhile, has uncovered at least two coronavirus cases involving its nationals who returned home from Thailand during that same chaotic period, raising fears the contagion might have spread among the thousands of cheek-by-jowl returnees trying to squeeze past the same checkpoints. (ST April 10, 2020)

(33) Reintegration is proving difficult for migrants amid such distrust. Mr Thet Zaw Aung, 35, who left his job at a Bangkok petrol station, was shunned when he returned home to [Myanmar's] Mon state. 'They treated me like I had brought the virus from Thailand and did not want to talk to me', he said. [. . .] Sai Tun Shwe received a call from his mother-in-law asking him not to enter her village. Then, he ran out of drinking water. 'I asked the shop to deliver more, but they didn't after finding out I had come back from Thailand. In the end, I had to hail a passing water truck', he said. (ST April 10, 2020)

In (31), the workers are depicted as doubly vulnerable through unsatisfactory existing work arrangements described in the post-modifying relative clause ('often in informal terms with little social protection'), exacerbated by the Thai authorities metaphorically 'pull[ing] the plug on commercial life', without forewarning ('abruptly') nor attentive to their social welfare ('without offering any alternative income support'). These (in)actions place the Thai authorities as directly responsible for leaving the MWs in a lurch, unable to 'survive'. In (32) and (33), the locational circumstance 'from Thailand' situates blame, implicitly, on that nation for causing the regional spread of Covid-19. The fallout of this is alarming for its neighbours – Myanmar in particular – at the state level ('raising fears') and experienced personally by returning MWs. In (33), MWs faced discrimination upon returning home from Thailand. Through a mixture of direct and indirect discourse representation, the personal hardships faced by returnees are specified in detail, highlighting their ostracization and deprivation by fellow citizens and family. In explicating the hardships, the article indirectly assigns blame to the Thai government for their plight. At the same time, (33) serves as an indictment on Myanmar and its citizens also for their overt stigmatization, and seeming lack of countermeasures by the government to address such discrimination.

Lack of professionalism demonstrated by Thai health officials is also highlighted as causing growing panic and for subsequent mishandling of the Covid outbreak in the region:

(34) The health ministry provided disinfectants, masks and gloves, he said, but healthcare staff who came daily to monitor the returnees' temperatures were so scared, they influenced local sentiment. (ST April 10, 2020)

(35) 'Even our volunteers became fearful when they looked at how the government health workers acted'. (ST April 10, 2020)

The behaviour of Thai government-deployed health officials towards their own migrant returnees is shown to have had a negative impact on the confidence levels of the people. The lack of professionalism demonstrated by health workers in (34) and (35) is apparent in the adjectives 'so scared' (to describe the health workers) and 'fearful' (to describe volunteers influenced by them). The dissonance between the health workers' perceived job scope (monitoring returnees) and their actual behaviour (being afraid of the returnees) is amplified with the contrastive 'but' where such unprofessional and irresponsible behaviour persisted despite their medical provisions (disinfectants, masks and gloves). By emphasizing the negative influence government health workers had on the public, the article portrays Thai government health workers as derelict in their duty and as fuelling a crisis in public confidence. This stands in stark contrast to the case of Singapore's deployment of its own teams on the ground.

Regional neighbours inability to cope

In this part, how regional governments are shown as overwhelmed in their management of MW populations at the height of the pandemic is evaluated:

(36) Tens of thousands of newly jobless migrants from neighboring Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos surged home. (ST April 10, 2020)

(37) Given that asymptomatic Covid-19 patients can still be dangerously infectious, it is hard to measure the actual fallout from the recent exodus of migrant workers from Bangkok. (ST April 10, 2020)

(38) Singapore's own struggle with containing the outbreak among foreign workers has also led to concerns over whether Malaysia is monitoring the millions of migrant workers in the country who also live in cramped and often derelict conditions. [. . .] There are further worries of undocumented migrants - estimated to outnumber legal foreign workers by a count of 3.3 million to 2.2 million - falling through the cracks. (ST April 25, 2020)

Numerical figures are highlighted to show the magnitude of migrants affected by Covid-19, and the outcome implied for regional governments. The size 'tens of thousands of newly jobless migrants' imply the economic fallout for home countries in (36), while 'millions of migrant workers' and 'a count of 3.3 million to 2.2 million' highlight the enormity of MW problems confronting Malaysia in (38). In (37), owing to asymptomatic

transmission of the Covid virus, the phrase 'actual fallout', which implies a higher scale than can be gauged, reinforces criticism of the Thai government. The large numbers as well as the inability to ascertain numbers, coupled with the metaphorical expressions 'surged' and 'exodus' that bear connotations of large-scale mass movements are especially alarming in the context of Covid-19, due to the highly contagious and transmissible nature of the virus. In (38), while briefly acknowledging Singapore's own difficulties in containing the spread of the virus in its migrant clusters, the extract quickly diverts attention onto Malaysia, Singapore's closest neighbour, by placing it on the hot seat. The adverb 'also' (in 'migrant workers in the country who also live in cramped and often derelict conditions') paints a picture of Malaysian migrants' living conditions as similarly mirroring those for which Singapore had been loudly criticized. The comparison implies that the deplorable living conditions of migrants was not unique to Singapore. In fact, Malaysia's situation is represented as far worse, through the citing of large numbers (discussed earlier) and highlighting the added complicating issue of illegal MWs at risk. Altogether, the discursive effect is one of alarm. Note the use of the nominalizations 'concerns' and 'worries', which obscure who it is that is actually concerned and worried, yet succeeds in raising doubts over Malaysia's responsiveness to the crisis.

Owing to the scale of MW populations affected in the region, ST articles also highlight the inability of home countries to cope with returning workers due to overstretched resources:

(39)   'We do not have enough capacity to monitor all of them. Neither do we have the ability to quarantine them all for 14 days', Cambodian Interior Minister Sar Kheng was quoted as saying by the Voice of America. (ST April 10, 2020)

(40)   Myanmar, whose nationals form the bulk of some four million migrant workers in Thailand, had to tighten what was initially a home-quarantine system as the fear of imported infections from returning workers grew. Its health and sports ministry declared the country at risk of developing a major outbreak [. . .] Workers and officials interviewed detailed what could best be described as an often self-regulated system. (ST April 10, 2020)

Excerpts (39) and (40) highlight the unsatisfactory responses of countries dealing with large numbers of returning migrants (as implied by 'all' in (39) and 'grew' in (40)). Through negative polarity, (39) represents a candid admission of failure to provide healthcare comprehensively to returning migrants to Cambodia. In excerpt (40), by 'workers and officials' own admission of an approach that 'could best be described as an often self-regulated system', Myanmar's updated safety measures are depicted as piecemeal and unstructured (in contrast to Singapore's own organized approach in the monitoring of its MWs.)

Irresponsibility and non-compliance of their MWs

Finally, in contrast to the cooperativeness of MWs in Singapore who were interviewed by ST, the migrants in Thailand whose experiences are selectively reported were decidedly less responsible and compliant.

(41) [A MW] went shopping at the market the very next day [after being told to quarantine at home]. 'I thought maybe it was not so strict', he said. (ST April 10, 2020)

(42) Another two migrants resisted quarantine and simply went into hiding. (ST April 10, 2020)

(43) 'I didn't wear a mask and neither did other passengers [in the bus]', the 33-year-old carpenter told The Straits Times. (ST April 10, 2020)

These workers, notably, demonstrate irresponsible behaviour by flouting the authority's safety measures in the height of the pandemic. (41) and (42) are reports of MWs disobeying quarantine orders. Their wilful non-compliance is signalled by the worker in (41) going shopping – note the temporal adverbial 'the very next day' –, attributing his transgression of safety measures to the perceived lack of stringency in his quarantine order. Example (42) amplifies the irresponsibility by documenting the extremes to which MWs are willing to resort ('resisted quarantine and simply went into hiding') in order to preserve their personal freedom. In (43), the worker admits to not taking public safety measures seriously by not masking up, with the excuse that this was flouted by others as well. On the one hand, in stark contrast to the Singapore case, all these workers are depicted as irresponsible and selfish in putting individual freedoms and comfort above the collective health of the public, thereby endangering their wider community. On the other hand, their actions also suggest possible lack of enforcement capability on the part of the regional authorities.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study, the national news media's meta-pragmatic strategy of positive self-image recovery of the Singapore government, amidst criticisms of mismanaging its MW population at the height of the pandemic was discussed. It is proposed that the strategy of restoring a positive self-image was realized through a presentational mechanism involving at least three interconnecting ideological circles on a plane of strategic proximation and distanciation. At the core were positive self-presentation moves about the Singapore government's responsiveness to the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus in the MW dormitories. Government authorities were shown explaining their viewpoints concerning criticisms received. By pointing to complexities of the situation and practical social realities on the ground, the news articles presented the government as a considered decision-maker, brushing aside reproaches of negligence and mismanagement. At the same time, the focus was directed at the government's efforts to address MWs' needs holistically, and the massive coordination involved to ensure that such needs were met. Overt emphasis on the resulting improvements of the situation can then be understood as an affirmation of the government's efficiency and duty of care towards its vulnerable and marginalized non-residential population. All these align with van Dijk's (2000) observations regarding emphasizing positive information and de-emphasizing negative information about Us.

At the outer circle, regional governments were positioned as Others (big 'O'), at whom negativization moves were targeted to show up 'their' gross mismanagement of

the Covid-19 crisis, which made vulnerable 'their' MWs and the region at large. ST's portrayal of regional neighbours as Others, in this case, served as an ideological tactic of presenting 'diversions to avoid the spotlight of blame and shift the public agenda onto other issues' (Hood, 2011: 56). At the same time, casting foreign governments' actions negatively served as an implicit point of comparison to Singapore which, as ST articles showed, subsequently responded to addressing the virus outbreak in its migrant clusters with much more care and competency. 'Their' failure, therefore, helped to emphasize 'our' successes, and bolster discursive recovery efforts of 'our' self-image.

Like the foreign governments, 'their' MWs were also portrayed adversely, which indirectly reflected back negatively on the regional governments. Both regional governments and their MWs, therefore, were categorically negativized as Other (big 'O'). The ST articles, however, seemed to position local MWs, ideologically, between the inner and outer circles. Singapore's MWs were benignly othered (small 'o') as non-residents, and their actions positivized as responsibly compliant in adhering to Covid-19 measures and doing their part to help curb transmissions (unlike 'their MWs'). The dotted line depicting their ideological circle (in Figure 1) indicates their liminal discursive positionality in the present case, indexing the mutuality of them helping the nation as well as the government's extension of care for them. Presenting the workers favourably and avoiding negative information about them are ideologically significant for several reasons: their labour contributes to Singapore's national development; their plight during the pandemic drew massive public sympathies; and their 'good' behaviour also indirectly reflected positively on the Singapore government's management of them. To be sure, however, their non-negativization, in this case was strategic for the achievement of ST's meta-pragmatic strategy of positive self-image recovery of the Singapore government. Representations of the 2013 riots mentioned earlier, as well as the government's policy of closely regulating them and denying them permanent residency at all costs, reveal a latent negative stance towards MWs. This means that the featured dotted line is subject to becoming a solid exclusionary boundary line, depending on the particular sociopolitical and temporal circumstances at play. The MWs' reported compliance in the present study, moreover, allude to their position of socio-economic precarity in Singapore and fear of repatriation. It is a position of vulnerability created and maintained by government authorities, excluding MWs from Singapore society, based on race, class, nationality and heteronormative biases, which render them abject, alien, and perpetually outside the nation (Oswin, 2019).

This article ends with a few considerations for future research. First, the Covid-19 pandemic can be an inflection point for countries to reassess and strengthen government-MW relations. Using the case of Singapore, concerted efforts of swift action, decision leadership and consultative approaches are utilized, in combination, to show how relations – even though ultimately self-serving – can be repaired and advanced in societies where MWs play a key role in the socio-economic fabric of a nation. Second, while this study focused on press reports, the growth of social media such as Facebook or Instagram, may reveal unique intricacies and offer alternative perspectives of government-MW relations over the course of the pandemic (Marschke et al., 2021). Third, although approaching this study of government-migrant relations through the lens of media framing and reporting reveals important ideological mechanisms at work, future

research may seek to undertake longitudinal studies comprising sentiment analysis via surveys, interviews, focus groups or ethnographies, to explore multi-faceted perspectives of government-MW relations alongside mediatized sources (Yadav and Priya, 2021). Finally, the notion of 'ideological circles' offers a way to conceptualize multiple actors tactically positioned (and shifting) not only in discourses of government-migrant relations in a time of crisis, but potentially in a range of other sorts of inter-group relations for strategic purposes.

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