



Struggling in im/mobility: lived experience of Macao's mainland Chinese migrant laborers' via WeChat Moments during COVID-19

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Abstract

The coronavirus epidemic (COVID-19) has led to drastic changes in social life. Focusing on a group of essential workers, this study examines how mainland Chinese low-skilled labor migrants discursively manifest their everyday lives via WeChat Moments. From analyzing social media posts and interview data, this study demonstrates that these labor migrants' stay in Macao was a period of unsought and undesired time of waiting, impacted by socio-structural constraints of class, age, gender, and outsider identity. Participants experienced positive (happiness with new-found opportunities) and negative emotions (anxiety and entrapment) during forced immobility due to border closures. This study contributes to understandings of border-crossing as interpreted and experienced via social media discourse.

Keywords: social media discourse, emotions, social-cultural approach, essential workers, COVID-19

On February 5, 2020, the first case of the COVID-19 virus was reported in Macao. The physical and political border that separates the mainland Chinese city of Zhuhai from the Special Administrative Region (SAR) of Macao was closed, except for the delivery of essential services. This closure dramatically impacted people's lives, including thousands of Chinese laborers who commuted daily from their home/residence in Zhuhai, to their workplace in Macao (Ju & Sandel, 2019). Because most low-skilled workers are classified as "essential," they could not work remotely and had to remain on the Macao-side. Thus, their daily transit became an involuntary stay, with the future reopening of the border unknown. Quarantine policies and social distancing were in a state of flux, changing in response to the number of cases, and negatively impacting the living conditions of these mainland workers (Guadagno, 2020).

While COVID-19 disruptions continue and have global impacts, our interest is in critically exploring how female workers were impacted by COVID-19 during the initial period in 2020 when the border between Macao and Zhuhai (mainland) was closed. Labor sectors, especially across Asia, are gendered, with such sectors as health care, domestic help, and cleaning services, dominated by female workers (Thang & Yu, 2004; Wallis, 2018). Hence, during COVID-19, women—who constitute over 70% of global frontline health and social care workers (Foley & Piper, 2020)—are more likely to work on the front lines. Furthermore, because women have greater family care responsibilities, they are

further burdened when their mobility between places of work and home is constrained (Adey et al., 2021).

Set against these challenges are the communicative resources, including the social media app, WeChat used by commuting laborers to seek information, build bonds of friendship, and gain a degree of agency and control over their routine lives (Ju et al., 2019). Social media offers approaches for recording and representing personal lives online, as participants negotiate and integrate local practices, ideas, values, and identities. That is, social media can exhibit discourse-in-action by showing how practice is mediated, and is a site for individual and social expression (Wallis, 2018), where persons can enact membership and take concrete action (Jones et al., 2015). Recent studies of social media use during times of epidemics have found positive outcomes, such as the ability of citizens to find helpful information, or governments to communicate real-time information about the course of a disease (Ding & Zhang, 2010), and negative outcomes, such as the propagation of misinformation (Roberts et al., 2017).

Few, however, have studied social media as a discursive demonstration of users' disrupted lives, and the linkages between online discourse and the offline socio-cultural context. Furthermore, less attention has been paid to studying women's voices and their experiences during health crises, and what can be done to improve their preparedness and responses (Ryan & El Ayadi, 2020; Wenham et al., 2020). Therefore, this study critically examines the challenges faced by a group of female essential workers in Macao, SAR China, to unpack how contested and unequal power relations are

constituted in crisis. It draws upon a range of data, including the first author's longitudinal ethnographic observations, interviews, and participants' posts to the Chinese social media app WeChat's Moments. This research analyzes the discursive social media practices of female workers, showing how their lives are disrupted during health-caused stress, and how social media can be a resource for affective communication and agency (Wallis, 2018). In sum, this study investigates how WeChat Moments can be used as a tool for expressing emotions and discloses the power dynamics in shaping labor migrants' lived experiences during COVID-19.

Low-skilled mainland Chinese migrant workers in Macao and COVID-19

Macao, a SAR of China, is a hybridized and diasporic landscape, constituted by the forces of neoliberalism, globalization, and migration (Choi, 2006; Shi, 2018). With income generated from Macao's casinos, it is one of the wealthiest places on earth (Simpson, 2016). Yet Macao also has a labor shortage, especially for low-skilled and low-paying occupations, such as construction workers, servers in hotels/restaurants, and domestic workers (Ju & Sandel, 2020). Figures from the Labour Affairs Bureau of Macao peg the number of non-resident workers at the end of September 2020, as 181,697, with most from mainland China, the Philippines, and Vietnam (Macao Labour Affairs Bureau, 2020).

Many low-skilled mainland Chinese migrant workers in Macao must cross and navigate the "one-county, two-systems" border, which both benefits and disadvantages mainland workers: wages are higher in Macao, but so is the cost of living. Therefore, under normal conditions (i.e., pre-COVID), workers commute daily across the SAR border, from the mainland city of Zhuhai (where they sleep) to Macao (where they work). This circular migration has afforded a daily practice of border-crossing, marked by a fixed political and physical border, that separates work (Macao side) from personal (mainland side) activities (Ju & Sandel, 2020). Yet one resource used on both sides of the border is the social media app, WeChat, that meets many social and interpersonal needs: information seeking, emotional support, relational building and bonding, and business activities (Ju et al., 2019).

Social media discourse, WeChat and female migrant workers

Social media encompass a set of multimodal tools, practices, and ideologies that allow people to communicate and collaborate (Boyd, 2015). They can be used to construct and reveal the everyday lives and discursive practices of users, through multimodal functions, including language and visuals. Social media discourse is evident at discreet moments and places, impacted by users' agency, the affordances of the technology, and the socio-cultural environment (Aguirre & Davies, 2015; Ju et al., 2019; Walz & Fitzgerald, 2020).

Featured in participatory interaction and user-generated content, a social media communication paradigm encourages "bottom-up social discourses" instead of "institutionally gate-kept discourses" (KhosraviNik, 2014, p. 294). Digital discourse can be studied in both micro communicative and macro-discursive regimes that integrate cultural, social, and political factors (KhosraviniK, 2017; KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018).

WeChat, an all-encompassing mobile application service developed by Tencent in 2011, is widely used by people across China; it is a "super app" that affords various interactive functions like Group Chats, Moments, Games, Red Packet, Official Accounts, and WeChat Pay. A burgeoning field of research examines the functions and affordances of WeChat at micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (e.g., Ju et al., 2019; Huang & Miao, 2020). For instance, WeChat is used by women in rural China to promote their knowledge acquisition, business acumen, and emotional self-expression (Wang & Sandner, 2019). The app provides a venue for studying the mobile practices and techno-social relationships of female migrant workers within China (Pei & Chib, 2020; Wallis, 2018). Studies of WeChat use have found that rural and migrant Chinese do not have the same resources and privileges of mobility as those with higher income, education, and social status (e.g., Ju & Sandel, 2019, Shi, 2018; Wang & Sandner, 2019).

As migrant labor is situated in intersectional tensions generated by migrants' mobility, social power, and controlling forces administrated by employers, states, and governmental authorities (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). WeChat discourse is a way to understand how lives are disrupted by COVID-19.

Social-cultural approach to emotions and Im/mobilities

Power relations and disparities in human mobility are the foci of many migration studies (e.g., Abdul Azeez et al., 2021; Bélanger & Silvey, 2020; Conlon, 2011). Social groups and individuals vary in their abilities and access to cross-border movements (Massey, 1994). The extent of mobility can be partly explained from a political approach (Cresswell, 2010), that is, the variation in mobility could be explained by the role of power (e.g., nations) and social relations (e.g., class, gender, ethnicity). When governments impose or increase border controls, immobility—marked by periods of stopping and waiting—becomes a prominent part of migrants' border-crossing lives. Built on the interconnections of mobility and fixity, regimes of mobility studies argue that im/mobilities are constructed by unequal relational power, and are shaped by the social, political, cultural, and economic relations within a designated context (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). The term "im/mobility turn," therefore, has been conceptualized to map out how forces (e.g., constraints, regulations, and inequality) shape particular forms of movement like "migration, everyday mobility, and border-crossings" (Bélanger & Silvey, 2020, p. 3425).

An understudied research field in migration processes is emotions, as the "migration process is a powerful catalyzer of change in emotional life" (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015, p. 74). By viewing emotions as a social-cultural construct affected by social structures such as class and gender (Lutz & White, 1986), and as a constitution of the migration experience (Skrbiš, 2008), migrants' emotions are complicated and fluid, in response to changing material, relational and spatial factors. Cangià (2017), who defines emotion as the "dialectics between socio-culturally situated and subjective experiences" (p. 23), shows how the migration experience brings to light discourses of the normative socio-cultural context, personal feelings, and emotion management. Furthermore, digital media has created a new space to facilitate emotional bonds in

im/mobilities across different contexts (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015; Wallis, 2018).

Built on the female migrants' WeChat use in their daily life, the present study further analyzes how female mainland workers in Macao narrated their experiences and emotions on WeChat during a time of crisis, which contributes to understanding how WeChat posts can serve as interpretive commentary and a constituent part of their migratory and border-crossing in/activities. Their posts before, during, and after a period of forced stay in Macao, are a digital resource revealing how they expressed emotions during COVID-19. In addition, women labor migrants' interactions with the situated social and cultural environment of Macao are explored to demonstrate how their im/mobilities and emotions are shaped by underlying social-cultural forces.

Methodology

Data collection

Guided by online ethnography (Hart, 2017), from February to May 2020, the first author followed and observed the WeChat Moments posts (Similar to Facebook, users can update their status by posting photos and verbal text to interact with friends. See Figure 1 for details) of eight female mainland Chinese labor migrants who worked as cleaners in Macao. This spans the time from when they were first stuck in Macao, until and after the border was reopened and border-crossing activities resumed. Moments posts were supplemented with seven in-depth interviews (one interview per participant, excluding an informal chat for one participant), probing participants' intentions and the interpretive meaning of posts. Interviews (30–35 minutes) were conducted at participants' work sites from July to September 2020, a time when the most restrictive border restrictions were lifted. Each interview centered on the challenges that participants faced during the pandemic and their use of WeChat. Data triangulation (Carter et al., 2014) helped to gain a broader understanding of the participants' experiences.

This study was built on mutual trust. The first author has known two participants for over three years, who then helped recruit other participants. As shown in Table 1, the

participants were all in their 30s and 40s ($M=40.5$, $SD=6.5$) from the southern provinces of China. Most completed only junior high school (nine years), and all worked in the occupation of cleaning, at places like public toilets, school buildings, or sports stadiums. All were married with more than one child and worked in Macao ranging from one to eight years.

While the number of posts by each participant varied, all posted similar types of messages: text + image (i.e., picture or sticker), short video, and repost. For this paper, 126 posts of product promotion without accompanying text, were excluded. In total, we examined 351 screenshots from eight participants, consisting of 182 image posts, 158 video posts, and 11 reposts. Figure 1 shows the different types of posts shared across time.

Data analysis

WeChat Moments posts were analyzed as digital discourse at two levels. At the horizontal levels, the content of posts was identified as a digital meaning-making practice to demonstrate participants' usage patterns. At the vertical level, digital practices and discourses were positioned and interpreted with the offline environment (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018).

The first author initially coded the 351 screenshots (including the pictures, texts and emojis) and created a preliminary codebook. Guided by this preliminary codebook, the second author re-analyzed the data. The two coders both identified six themes: food, pleasure, border-crossing/closure, challenges, family, and weather. Three other codes—self-expression, COVID-19, and daily routine—were identified by the second coder. Therefore, a new codebook was created after a discussion of the coding results by both authors. The two authors then recoded the screenshots independently, achieving an inter-rater agreement of 71.8%. Coding inconsistencies were discussed until both authors reached consensus. The thematic pattern of WeChat Moments was identified, as shown in Table 2.

The theme of border closure (37.6%) was identified in the highest number of posts. It included three sub-themes: challenges (e.g., economic pressure, mental anxiety), pleasures (e.g., sightseeing, funny videos), daily routines, and



Figure 1. WeChat Moments posts

Table 1. Participants' demographic information

Participant	Age	Education Background	Marriage/Children	Original Place (City/Province)	Length of Working in Macao	Job Duties (Cleaning)	Number of posts
1	31	Junior high school	Married/2	Jiangmen, Guangdong	1 year	Teaching building	71
2	34	Primary school	Married/2	Huizhou, Guangdong	3 years	Teaching building	37
3	35	Junior high school	Married/2	Zhuhai, Guangdong	4 years	Sports stadium	55
4	35	Technical secondary school	Married/2	Jiangmen, Guangdong	>2 years	Public toilet	33
5	39	Primary school	Married/3	Zhanjiang, Guangdong	>2 years	Public toilet	12
6	46	Junior high school	Married/2	Changsha, Hunan	2 years	Public toilet	25
7	46	Junior high school	Married/3	Jiujiang, Jiangxi	>1 year	Public toilet	74
8	47	Junior high school	Married/3	Zhangjiajie, Hunan	8 years	Public toilet	44

Table 2. Emergent themes in participants' moments posts

Number of posts	Identifiable (Sub) themes	Image	Video	Repost	Total	
132 (37.6%)	Border closure	difficulties & pressure (e.g., <i>mental & economic</i>)	22	15	4	41
		life routine (e.g., <i>greeting</i>)	15	24	0	39
		pleasure & hope (e.g., <i>sightseeing, funny video</i>)	14	18	1	33
		COVID-19 information	12	6	1	19
104 (29.6%)	Food & drinks	gathering with friends	33	31	0	64
		food show	32	8	0	40
62 (17.7%)	(Re)normalized border-crossing	border re-opening (e.g., <i>nucleic acid testing</i>)	33	24	2	59
		before border closure	2	1	0	3
14 (4.0%)	Family	interactions with family	8	6	0	14
12 (3.4%)	Weather		8	4	0	12
27 (7.7%)	Miscellaneous		3	21	3	27
Total			182	158	11	351

COVID-19 information sharing. Food posts included two types: displays of food items and sharing meals with friends. Most photos were posted during the period of border closure. The (re)normalized border-crossing theme depicted life after the reopening of the Macao-Zhuhai border—weekly nucleic acid testing, the crowded border, and *Daigou* activity (personalized cross-border trading, Xie, 2018). Another two themes were family interaction and the weather.

The first author, who was most familiar with the participants and their border-crossing, coded the seven audio-recorded interviews to identify emergent themes (Braun & Clarke 2006). Centered around the key interview topics: (1) the impacts of COVID-19; (2) life challenges; (3) the needs of participants; and (5) lived experiences at the beginning of the outbreak and current life, six thematic codes were identified: (1) economic burdens (e.g., unpaid leave, rent in Zhuhai, high living cost in Macao); (2) poor living conditions (e.g., small rooms, dirty beds, crowded conditions); (3) emotional problems (e.g., worry, anxiety, desperation); (4) missing family (e.g., children, husbands); (5) gathering with friends and colleagues (e.g., walking around, cooking); and (6) border reopening (e.g., nucleic acid testing, green code signifying that the user is healthy and is free to move around during the pandemic).

Comparing the key themes derived from postings and interviews, data converged, and most codes were identified in these two types of data. (Posts about the weather, which occurred online only, were excluded from further analysis.) Three main themes were generated by synthesizing the themes from both data sources: (1) feelings of entrapment (e.g., anxiety, economic burden); (2) enjoyment (e.g., gathering and having meals with friends); and (3) struggles of hopes in border crossing (e.g., congestion at the border).

The authors obtained the participants' consent to share the screenshots from their Moments, and removed the information (e.g., face, username) that would identify the participants when reporting the findings.

Findings

For this article, we present findings primarily from online data, showing how participants chronologically and thematically presented and interpreted their disrupted lives embedded in emotions across time and space. Interview data supplement and deepen the analysis. Translations of Chinese language excerpts were done by the first author and checked for accuracy by the third.

Entrapment causing feelings of anxiety and desperation

During COVID restrictions, participants felt vulnerable economically, and suffered emotionally. Participants experienced anxiety brought by their financial stress. One participant described her life when trapped in Macao in an interview:

Eight persons share two small rooms without windows. I spend at least 1000 MOP [124 USD] on living costs per month. The food price increased by at least 5 yuan [0.78 USD] after the consumption cards were issued in Macao. I miss home in Zhuhai and can't get used to being in Macao.

The higher cost of food and daily goods in Macao and the rent on unoccupied rooms in Zhuhai that they continued to pay further stressed their already "not-that-good" financial condition. Unlike Macao locals, whose income was



Figure 2. Emotional responses during COVID

supplemented several times during the pandemic via “consumption cards” (funding allocated to Macao ID holders under the government’s electronic consumption benefits plan), non-resident workers received no support from the local government. This is seen in a repost of a caption shown in Figure 2, “The welfare of Macao locals is good. Three-month’s income is given as a subsidy each time. I just say it and have no comment.”

Quarantine policies and uncertainties exacerbated participants’ negative emotions. Above a repost of a text from the Macao SAR government that explains cross-border transit procedures, one participant wrote:

14 days quarantine for departure, 14 days quarantine for entering. See you after a month. Take 10,000 MOP [1,250 USD] with you for grocery shopping at Gongbei [Zhuhai], 400 for shopping, and 9,600 for quarantine. (Figure 2).

When staying in Macao, participants’ emotional problems—*anxiety, loneliness, and helplessness*—were salient. One participant wrote the following: “Desperate and disappointed. Continue to practice seclusion (*bi guan*) and very quickly will become a Macao local person” (Figure 2). Participants’ affective responses to their life in Macao were often expressed through the Chinese character “*guan*” (关) which means “closed” or “secluded” here. For instance, participants used *guan* to describe their status as being closed off, like a prisoner whose movements are restricted. Faced with the economic pressures and uncertainties of being stuck in Macao, some participants had insomnia. The pandemic exacerbated the urgency of the desire to return to Zhuhai—a place many perceived to be their home and where they felt free (Ju & Sandel, 2020)—in contrast with a closed life in Macao.

During the crisis, women were more vulnerable and suffered higher psychological stress than male counterparts (Wenham et al., 2020) due to their predominant role as mothers and caregivers in the family. We see this in a WeChat post of two children with smiling faces and the caption, “All is about missing” (Figure 2). Participants missed their children, which was echoed by what a 31 year old worker said in an interview: “I suffered pain because my children were at home, and I missed them so much. But I couldn’t do anything for my family.”

While staying in Macao during the pandemic could be interpreted as a personal choice for these female labor migrants, their position as low-educated workers with family obligations and limited job opportunities meant that this “choice” was forced. One participant who worked in Macao for four years said:

We are past the age of impulsiveness. If you quit the job and go back to the mainland, it is not easy to find a job under this economic condition. The tuition fee for my children going to school is expensive, and I don’t have 8000 RMB [1,000 USD] for the 14-day quarantine.

Participants felt dependent on their mobile phones and the app, WeChat—available on both sides of the border—that they used to contact family and friends and follow the latest epidemic-relevant information. Similar to the feelings of “anxious immobilities” in Macao during COVID-19 described by Zuev and Hannam (2020), the closed border heightened their anxiety. Before the pandemic, Macao was only a temporary place for them. They had neither a sense of belonging nor the intention to adapt (Ju & Sandel, 2020). The epidemic forced them to live in Macao as sojourners. They were beset with financial and emotional problems, making them feel vulnerable. WeChat was a crucial tool for these labor migrants to reach out to their families and express emotional duress. As shown in Figure 2, Helplessness:

Today [my mobile phone is broken so [I am] unable to log into WeChat, and have no contact with any family members. With my body in a new place, the feeling is one of helplessness. This kind of feeling is something that only [I] myself can feel.

When staying in Macao, participants’ anxiety caused by financial stress and missing family was exacerbated by the prolonged entrapment in Macao. Social media, usually operating on mobile phones, became the only pathway for these female workers to connect with family and friends back in mainland China.

Enjoyment in Macao exploration and friends gathering

There were, however, benefits for staying in Macao. Pre-COVID, mainland laborers worked six days per week, 12 hours

per day, and had neither the time nor opportunity to explore Macao's sights and tourist places. Yet during COVID, they had more free time not only because they were not commuting, but because working hours were reduced. After the border opened, one participant described her trapped life in Macao:

I didn't have to commute to the Macao-Zhuhai border, and I felt not so tired. In Macao, I spent half a month at work and played for the rest, just earning money to survive.

Participants came to know Macao by experiencing its hybridized culture, such as by tasting Indonesian and Thai foods, and visiting local scenic spots like the Ruins of Saint Paul's Cathedral, one of Macao's most famous landmarks as shown in Figure 3.

Though some worked in Macao for years, it was their first time to experience Macao's "hybridized culture." For example, the comment below "Thai Food" reads: "It is my first time to eat Thai food. It's really good." Below "Sightseeing," one participant wrote, "The achievement of walking a whole day." The emojis that we see in these messages—smiling face 😊 and thumbs-up 👍—accent the emotional key of these posts, indicating feelings of happiness and joy when experiencing Macao in new ways.

Their happy moments were when they could gather with colleagues/friends. Contrasting with the homesickness and boredom voiced in other posts, they could experience a "new" culture experience and amusement instead. The foods displayed in these pictures are everyday items: vegetables, fish balls, chicken feet, and beer served with stainless-steel bowls on a small table (Figure 3). The accompanying text states: "Haven't eaten like this for a long time." Most food photos do not depict dining-out experiences, but home-cooked style, showing how they enjoy food while economizing expenses. This contrasts with young, middle-class Chinese urbanites' posts that show pictures of expensive foreign foods and beverages in daily routines (Peng, 2019).

When trapped in Macao, participants could not afford the same foods they were accustomed to eating in Zhuhai; most bought only discounted food. However, mealtimes could be happy times when shared with friends. For instance, under

one picture (not shown), the text reads: "Thank you for your company on this lonely night." No matter the quality or price of the food, these food photos can communicate feelings of intimacy and solidarity. Sometimes, drink photos are used as an invitation to friends, as Figure 3, an image of grape juice captions: "Anyone want to chat? Let's chat all night and listen to your heart 🐱🐱." They also posted self-made videos recording "happy moments" spent together with friends, such as eating and visiting scenic spots in Macao (while socially distanced), and reposted funny videos, catchy songs, and peaceful scenery.

While COVID restrictions allowed these workers to "play like tourists" or "locals," their circle of friends was limited to colleagues with the same/similar occupations, like cleaners. In an interview, one participant shared her experience working with Filipina/os:

When staying in Macao, the best thing was that I could work with the Filipina/os who worked in the hotel. They could teach me a lot in our chat, such as English and what their hometown looked like.

This leisure period provided opportunities to make friends with others outside their culture, that is, migrant workers from other countries (e.g., Thailand and Indonesia) who had similar occupations and life challenges under COVID. However, as found in previous research (Ju & Sandel, 2019, 2020), workers felt little connection with Macao locals. Though staying in Macao made the participants anxious and desperate, this waiting period did offer them a chance to rest, explore Macao, and make friends online and offline.

Struggles and hopes in border crossing

Participants kept a close eye on the updates about the Macao-Zhuhai border. For example, in May 2020, one participant wrote in a WeChat post (not shown): "Finally saw the light in the darkness. Not far away. Not far away. Fortunately, I never give up."

Feelings about the border reopening, however, were mixed. Participants complained about the crowds and the time wasted when crossing the border before the outbreak of COVID-19. This is shown in Figure 4, "Routine," with the

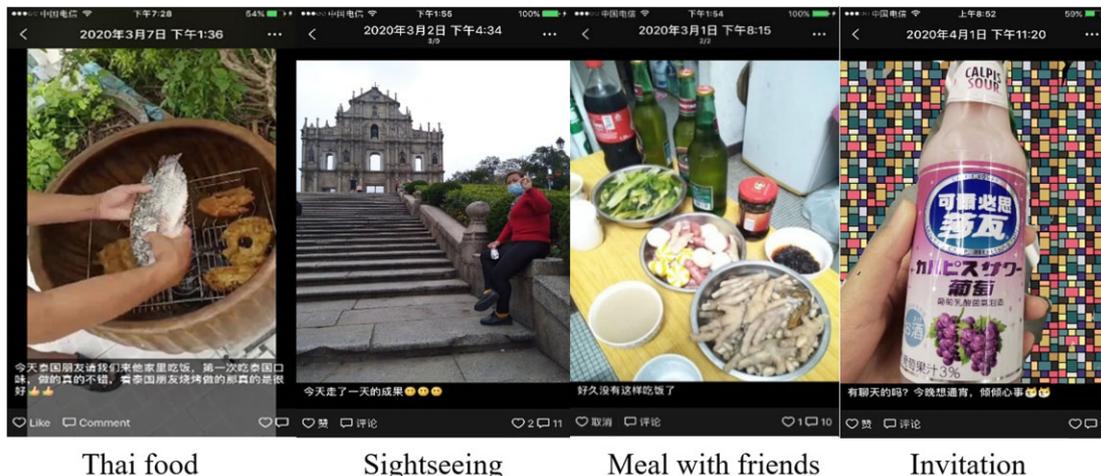
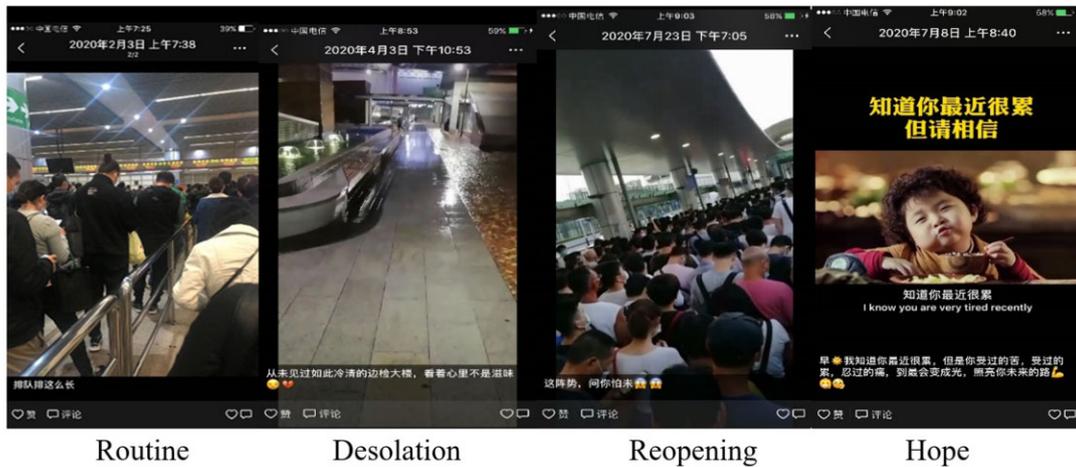


Figure 3. Life in Macao during COVID



Routine

Desolation

Reopening

Hope

Figure 4. Experiencing the Zhuhai-Macao border

image of a crowd of people in the immigration hall and the accompanying text, “Standing in a long queue.” Yet when the Zhuhai-Macao border was closed after COVID-19 struck Macao, they missed the crowds and the noisy border evident in the second image: “Have never seen the desolate immigration building. I don’t feel good when I see it.” There are no people in this photo. All that is visible is a shiny, wet floor and a long passage leading to the immigration hall. The emptiness, the lack of busy, long queues and crowds of people, signifies a disruption to the familiar patterns of life, crossing the border daily to be with family and friends on the other side.

The long waiting period made them feel shackled and desperate, knowing that they could not control when and how they could cross the border. One participant wrote: “Have been caged in Macao for almost four months. My friends started to leave Macao today. I am very anxious when it will be my turn.” Another participant further explained this:

The Macao-Zhuhai border reopened in May, but only non-resident workers with Zhuhai *hukou* [resident cards] could leave Macao. I had to wait when the restriction was lifted for [residents of] other cities in Guangdong province like Jiangmen.

Then when the time came that border controls were loosened, and non-resident workers in Macao were not required to quarantine on both sides in July 2020, the reopening led to new problems: massive congestion at the immigration border; this we see in the image, “Reopening.” The attached comment reads: “Are you frightened when [you] see this?”

Another concern was the requirement to have the COVID nucleic acid test every week. After reopening the Macao-Zhuhai border, workers resumed the daily pattern of border-crossing. However, even though there was no quarantine requirement, they were tested every seven days. A negative result was indicated on their phones as a “green code” on the health apps launched by the Macao government and Guangdong province. One participant discussed this pressure, “I was very concerned about my income. I had to do the COVID nucleic acid test every week in advance. This month I did it five times.”

Even though border crossing resumed, a new challenge was to get tested every week to receive the required “green code” for passage. The cost of a nucleic acid test in Zhuhai was 75 yuan [9.4 USD]. Moreover, life continued under a “new normal” that was physically and emotionally exhausting. Yet, the open border offered new hope, as we see in the image, “Hope,” with the caption: “I know that you are very tired. But please believe.” Below this image, a participant wrote a message of encouragement: “I know that in this time you are exhausted. But the misery, weariness, and pain you have suffered will ultimately become a shining light that guides your future path.”

The participants’ stay in Macao during the pandemic provided them with both anxiety and enjoyment. When the Zhuhai-Macao reopened, the renormalized life seemed to be a new equilibrium filled with striving, challenges, and hopes.

Discussion and conclusion

In the fight against COVID-19, Macao was the first city to reopen cross-border travel with mainland China without requiring quarantine (McCarty et al., 2021). The initial lockdown of Macao and its border closure and reopening during COVID-19, thus, can serve as a dynamic context for exploring the im/mobilities and emotions in border crossing. The present study not only extends the literature on labor migrants’ emotions, but theoretically integrates the emotions and im/mobilities to show how their stay in Macao was shaped as a period of unsought and undesired waiting at the nexus of online and offline space (see Figure 5).

Mainland Chinese migrant workers discursively sketched their disrupted lives as the co-constitution of captivity and newfound opportunities. Contextualized in the Macao-Zhuhai border, the migration trajectory pre- and during COVID-19, changing from border commuting to a forced stay in Macao, and then to continued border transit, gives a processual approach to examining how emotions are socially experienced in im/mobility. Findings explicate emotional states as complex and multifaceted, showing a degree of ambivalence (Bocconi & Baldassar, 2015). Unlike the conviviality via social media use seen on regular border-crossing days (Ju et al., 2019), participants’ emotions were intertwined with anxiety and desperation, relaxation, and happiness in a

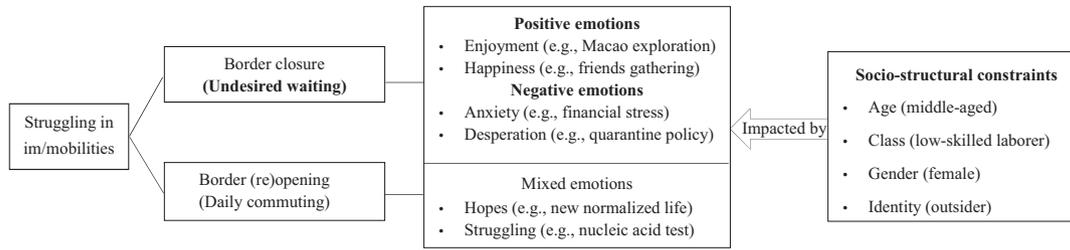


Figure 5. Lived experiences of mainland Chinese migrant laborers during COVID-19

new environment. Emotions are an integral indicator to understand the migrants' lived experiences (Cangià, 2017). Findings push us to ponder the implications of physical and social im/mobility in crisis, as migrants' lived experiences are impacted by socio-structural constraints of class, age, gender, and outsider (China mainland) identity, vividly manifesting how power dynamics function in im/mobilities (Bélangier & Silvey, 2020).

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, mainland Chinese low-skilled labor migrants self-identified as “outsiders” to Macao—regardless of how long they have worked in Macao—pointing to a social hierarchy with them near the bottom, and perceived discrimination in Macao (Ju & Sandel, 2020). Vulnerabilities were exacerbated during the pandemic, raising new emotional and economic pressures during their forced stay. This result is consistent with the study of the impacts of COVID-19 on migrant women workers in India (Abdul Azeez et al., 2021).

Moreover, low-skilled migrant workers' forced stay shows immobility as intrinsically complicated, more than physically and mentally constraining. When experiencing immobility, female participants in this study could experience Macao in new ways, enjoying off-duty days, and building friendships. Though novel experiences and emotions ostensibly were positive, these opportunities were not transformative as economic and relational stresses continued, showing that immobility is “dynamic and differentiated” (Schewel, 2020, p. 347). Employers reduced working hours because of fewer tourists, leading to lost wages. The new friends they made were migrant workers from other countries, reflecting their positionality, and further instantiating Macao's social hierarchy. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have explored the life of mainland Chinese male migrant workers who were stuck in Macao during the pandemic. But focusing on internal migrant workers in China, low-skilled workers have a higher rate of unemployment (Che et al., 2020), and female migrants suffered more economic vulnerabilities than males (Song et al., 2021).

Moreover, labor migrants' anxious stays in Macao were qualitatively different from those of Macao locals. During COVID-19, the Macao government increased its consumption payments to residents to ease the economic impacts (Consumption cards, 2020). Yet these benefits were not given to non-resident workers: immobility regimes differed across social groups. These structural constraints shaped mainland Chinese labor migrants' lived experiences as an undesired time of waiting over their im/mobility (Conlon, 2011).

Though undesired waiting felt like being imprisoned to these laborers, forces produced by structural constraints are always contested (Cresswell, 2010). Suffering from anxiety, loneliness, and desperation, labor migrants simultaneously

exhibited agency by building community through waiting (Vannini, 2011). They had meals with colleagues and friends, thus gaining support and companionship; these moments were recorded and represented via WeChat Moments. Using social media discourse as a practice, participants extended their messages and represented shared beliefs and attempts at agency. However, at the same time, this kind of social discourse is only accessible to their friends who are also migrant workers, which to some extent reinforces their marginalization. The findings capture the *paradox of social media's enabling and constraining role in shaping users' mobility*, or the dual logic of “immobile mobility”—experienced when technology offers a “social-techno” means of surpassing but not fully overcoming the “spatial, temporal, physical, and structural boundaries” (Wallis, 2013, pp. 6–7). And the new normalization of border crossing was linked with using WeChat Moments to lift their mood and seek information. Thus, Moments afforded and enabled participants ways to imagine an unrestricted life.

Methodologically, we note how emotions and im/mobilities are communicated via social media. The importance of social media as a tool for narrating the everyday and discursive practices of migrant populations, shows how this can be used as a method for future study. Social media discourse serves as a venue for understanding emotions and emergent practices in response to stressful situations. Further research on emotion, migration and digital communication may also foreground how users' structural forces (such as low-skilled and high-skilled labor migrants) shape social media's role, its use patterns and emotional impacts, as networked space is also a site for producing and revealing the structural inequalities (Cabalquinto, 2021). Consequently, studying social and technological impacts during a crisis help to better understand how migrants use social media to express and manage emotions.

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Data availability statement

The data in this project is not available publicly to meet the agreements with the participants.

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