

Effects on Mental Health and Subjective Well-being of Thai Marriages with Foreigners During COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This article investigated the factors affecting the mental health and subjective well-being among foreigners-in-law in Thailand coming from 6 countries, during the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 to December 2021. Based on a mixed-method approach, 560 recipients responded to an online survey and we conducted 25 in-depth interviews with key informants. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression, with content analysis for qualitative data. The results showed that the foreigner-in-laws wanted to be well taken care of by their Thai spouses and they appreciated the low cost of living in Thailand. However, they feared Covid-19 and worried about their well-being based on subjective evaluation because the respondents and their Thai spouses realized that they were not safe. In addition, the respondents did not know Thai laws, felt they were taken advantage of, were exposed to inequality, and felt insecure. Internal factors, such as age, positive emotion, negative emotion, and external factors, such as social support, socio-economic and physical factors, were significant ($p < 0.01$) predictors of subjective well-being.

Key words: Thai marriages foreigner, foreigner in-law, lifestyle, COVID-19, subjective well-being

Introduction

Transnational marriage migration is an important global phenomenon, yet each marriage remains an intimate, personal, and life-shaping event (Hongfang H, 2015). The cross-cultural marriages or transnational marriages have been common for many years in Thai culture and are increasing annually (Asok et.al., 2006). Foreigners have been increasingly coming to live in Thailand, especially in the Northeast and this has had a major impact (Phakdeekul et.al., 2011) regarding reducing the level of Thai poverty, especially Northeast Thailand and as a response to the disappointments of Thai women resulting from their marriages with Thai man (Boonmatthaya, 2005). Thai women meeting with foreigners like in travel place, and communicate by chatting and sending e-mails, with the text providing opportunities for both participants to learn about each other and resulting in marriage (Asok, 2006; Soikudruea, 2012). If Thai women do not have good

English-speaking skills, they often use a third party to help develop learning and understanding until there is a sufficient basis to develop a relationship and then decide on marriage. Four lifestyles can be identified: 1) the couple live separately but meet up on occasions; 2) they settle down in Thailand; 3) the foreigner lives with his Thai partner in her house in the country side; and 4) Normally, Thai women will not go to live abroad (Pimpakping et.al., 2005; Pomsema et.al., 2015).

Normally, humans seek well-being in their lifestyle, regardless of where they live. Well-being is comprised of life satisfaction, positive and negative effects, and psychological well-being. Conceptualizations of mental health and well-being involve a 6-factor structure consisting of the following subscales: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff & Singer, 2006). In addition, the factors that mediate the

emotional well-being of humans are burnout, job dissatisfaction, and intentions to leave a job. Predictor variables include individual factors, measures of workload, attributes of role stress, and sources of social support (Emel et.al., 2021). Therefore, social support can be viewed as both a variable exerting a direct influence on professional well-being and as a moderating variable. Study results have indicated that role stress (especially role ambiguity) was the best predictor of burnout and job dissatisfaction. The lack of supervisor support was the best predictor for job dissatisfaction and intentions to leave a job. Implications for practices in the workplace have been discussed (Erin et al., 2010), consisting of past negative and positive, present hedonistic, present fatalistic, and future time perspectives.

Marrying a foreigner in Thailand can result in economic gain and changes in cultural and racial experiences that are involved in mixed nationalities (Phakdeekul et.al., 2019; R., Xu, X. et al., 2010). In general, women may gain greater equality with men, while at the same time, deciding to marry a foreigner may impact on the male foreigner and involve the need to study and understand problems, threats, and the facts detailed in procedures and policies to result in a beneficial outcome from such situations (European Parliament, 2004). However, at present, because the Covid-19 pandemic continues to rage in parts of the world including Thailand, the World Health Organization (WHO) initially declared a public health emergency of international concern that grew into the confirmation of a global pandemic (WHO, 2022). The worldwide pandemic associated with the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has spreading throughout Thailand, affecting foreigners living in the country. Many countries have investigated public health. (Stokes et al., 2021; Glasziou, et.al., 2020) and found that the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on negative emotional symptoms has been serious with studies reporting high prevalence rates. Isolation, reduced social contact, duration of quarantine and restrictions are characteristics of a lockdown that play an important role in the increased negative emotional symptoms afflicting people (Oliveira et al., 2022). Because of the COVID-19 crisis, suicidal behavior is likely to be present for a long time

and to peak later than the actual pandemic; thus, it is imperative to decrease stress, anxiety, fear, and loneliness in the general population (Leo, 2020). Consequently, countries must be aware of this situation and develop mental support strategies to mitigate the impact. Research studies are needed regarding how mental health consequences can be mitigated during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the aim of the current study was to investigate main goals and lifestyle, factors affecting mental health, and subjective well-being among foreigners-in-law in Thailand who have originated from 6 countries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

This mixed method involved qualitative and quantitative research, with the quantitative segment of the study consisting of convenience sampling 2 major destinations involving local quarantine (LQ) and home isolation (HI) Quarantine Guidelines, in Northeast Thailand. In total 584 completed responses were received to the online survey. The subjective well-being scale (Tuzgöl-Dost, 2004) was used as a data collection tool. In the qualitative segment of the study, in-depth, unstructured interviews were conducted at LQ & HI sites, using the purposive sampling technique. The 15 interviewees were from 6 major home countries for foreigners-in-law in Thailand (Germany, 3; Australia, 2; Canada, 3; United State of America, 3; the Netherlands, 2; and The UK, 2) during January to December 2021. The qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis. In addition, the quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and evaluated for subjective well-being based on multiple regression.

Ethical Review

This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. All the participants provided informed consent before participating in the study. In addition, this study was approved by the Mahasarakham University Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (Approval number: 217-208/2021).

Results

Main goal and lifestyle of foreigners- in-law in Thailand

The important reasons to live in Thailand given by participants were: 1) Elderly foreigners in Europe and America were depressed because they were left alone there and wanted more friendship; 2) They were disturbed by foreign immigrants, so they want to avoid controversy and had moved to a new country; 3) They wanted to rest from hard work after retirement and wanted to have a great caregiver; 4) the Thai baht exchange rates for US dollars and euros were favorable; 5) a marriage with a Thai women had many positives, including they were good mothers, maids were available, and the proportion of women to men was favorable; and 6) there were tax advantages as Thailand has relatively lower tax rates.

Quality of living for foreigners- in-law in Thailand

The responses indicated that foreigner-in-laws had a good quality of life while in Thailand, with the following points made: 1) living in Thailand was so comfortable; 2) having a business partnership was relatively easy; 3) it was possible to live peacefully in the community in Thailand; 4) less complicated legal system; 5) could own a house; 6) 24 hour food service was available; 7) high income but low expense; 8) good travel network; 9) modern lifestyle possible; and 10) they could disseminate Thai culture in their home country.

Effects on mental health of foreigners- in-law during COVID-19 pandemic

While the Covid-19 pandemic continues to rage in parts of the world, Thai women and foreigners have realized that they were not safe, especially foreigners traveling internationally. Furthermore, 43.3% felt that COVID-19 had a significant negative impact on their physical and mental health., with issues identified including changes in policies and practice, workload and inadequate senior support. During the pandemic, 84.1% of respondents reported feeling anxious to some extent, with 48.1% identifying as moderately or severely anxious. Furthermore, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on their well-being had resulted in negative emotional symptoms, with studies reporting high prevalence rates for

isolation, reduced social contact, duration of quarantine, and restrictions. Such characteristics of a lockdown played an important role in the well-being of foreigners-in-law. Countries must be aware of this situation and development support mitigation strategies (Table 1).

Factors affecting subjective well-being of Thai marriages to foreigners during Covid-19 outbreak

The linear model for predicting subjective well-being (SWB) was based on age, socio-economics, the environment (physical factors), and social support; together they predicted SWB of 58.8% (adjusted $R^2=0.588$, $F=167.189$, $p<0.01$). Internal factors were age and negative emotion, while the external factor was social support; they were significant predictors of subjective well-being, Furthermore, age and negative emotion were negatively correlated with SWB ($\beta = -.020$, $p<0.05$; $\beta = -.665$, $p<0.05$). The external socio-economic factors affected SWB, such as the place of the person in society ($\beta = .149$, $p<0.01$). In short, these factors depended on an individual's reputation in the community which could directly affect the health of an individual. In addition, some environmental and physical factors, including various conditions, diseases, and illnesses, affected SWB, ($\beta = -0.071$, $p<.05$). The adjusted R^2 describes the strength of a model fit and was a useful tool for evaluating which predictors added value to this model (Table 2). The multiple regression equation can be used to estimate SWB based on age and socio-economic and environmental factors:

$$Z_{(SWB)} = 57.367 - .020(\text{age}) - .665(\text{negative emotion}) + .149(\text{socio-economic}) - .071(\text{environment})$$

Needs and Suggestions of foreigners- in-law in Thailand for support from Thai government

A body or organizations to provide information on legal services because they are uncomfortable and feel insecure.

They do not know the law and feel they are at risk of being taken advantages of by local agents.

They require help on taxation matters as it is not convenient to invest in Thailand.

Problems of foreigners-in-law in Thailand

The government does not update their data on foreigners.

They have trouble understanding Thai law and there is none to help them with this.

Communication is not easy and facilities for elderly males are not good.

Agents will take advantage of foreigners.

Unable to use Thai language and poor understanding of Thai culture mean they are at risk of being taken advantage of.

There are more senile foreigners.

Suggestions from foreigners - in-law in Thailand

The government should pay more attention to the safety of foreigners.

The government should take legal measures to protect the equality of people.

The government should take measures to protect data systems that can be accessed quickly and are accurate when foreigners report an unsafe situation and there is a risk of data loss.

The government should assist in vetting migrant workers if they are involved in human trafficking.

The government should help foreigners and improve their understanding of the legal system.

Take advantage of the culture and modern recognition of foreigners to change and live a more modern life.

Support travel within the network of foreigners, including their relatives who want to travel to Thailand.

The government should enact laws to improve security and ensure a good quality of life for Thai women and foreigners during Covid-19. The results of the study are summarized and be linked to why foreigners wish to visit and stay in Thailand, as shown in Figure 1.

Discussion

Foreigners, especially from Europe and the USA, like to live in Thailand. They especially want to be taken care of by Thai women, they like the weather and the free lifestyle. They also like the friendly culture, good food and good environment. These results are consistent with Boonmatthaya's (2005) study. Respondents' discomfort with the complex legal system, exploitation of agents, and lack of adequate security for assets and life on the Western model was consistent with the study of Pampakping et.al. (2005). The current study showed that marriages with foreigners boost the economy, build a network of relatives and travel, get new recognition from foreigners. There were negative comments that migrant workers, especially women, are involved in human trafficking, contrary to the immigration policies of European countries and the United States, which affects life abroad (Statistics Portugal, 2007). In particular, COVID-19 has been reported to have significant negative effects on physical and mental health (Elghobashy et. al., 2021), which was also addressed in the current study. Finally, the findings of the current study that foreigners in Thailand enjoy living peacefully in a Thai community and spreading their culture in Thailand have also been addressed in other studies (Gopalkrishnan, 2018; Phakdeekul et. al., 2019).

The results from the current study present insight on the multicultural and emotional intersection of cultural diversity and mental health differences of cultures and how these have a range of implications for mental health experts who must work with clients that are often from cultures other than their own that can involve the ways people view health and illness and the patterns of treatment sought (Phakdeekul et. al., 2021; Kedthongma and Phakdeekul, 2022). It is perhaps useful to separate the notion of one's subjective well-being from objective or external factors that drive or influence well-being such as material (housing) and financial (income) factors. Subjective well-being concerns peoples' self-reported assessment of their own well-being; an individual's appraisal of environmental circumstances, a person's behavioral response, and the subjective consequences of that process (Eleanor et al., 2013; New Economic Foundation, 2012).

An important finding of this study was that COVID-19 has had a negative impact on their physical and mental health, and negative emotional symptoms, which was in accordance with Fikret Gülaçtı (2010), who found that perceived social support predicted subjective well-being. In addition, it was determined that perceived family support predicted subjective well-being, and on the other hand the support which was perceived towards a special person and perceived friend support did not predict subjective well-being. Individuals differ in their use of emotion regulation strategies, such as reappraisal and suppression, and these individual differences have implications for well-being and social relationships (Gross and John, 2003).

Policy implications: While the Covid-19 pandemic continues to rage in parts of the world. Thai women and foreigners have realized they are not safe, especially foreigners traveling internationally. Thus, the Thai government should legislate to increase security and ensure a good quality of life for Thai women and foreigners during Covid-19 because, the COVID-19 pandemic is having far-reaching effects on the mental well-being of individuals in society. Therefore, authorities must consider not only the economic effects of social isolation, but also the mental impact on the community, by implementing appropriate measures, such as expansion of the “safe spaces” model, to help those suffering domestic abuse and those that are most vulnerable, to prevent further deterioration (Alradhawi et al., 2020).

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Table 1. Impact of Covid-19 pandemic on Thai women and foreigners. (n=560)

Impact issue	Percentage
1) Uncomfortable duration of quarantine	54.20
2) Negative impact on their physical and mental health	43.30
3) Uncertainty in policies and practice	67.90
4) Inadequate support	84.10
5) Feeling anxious	48.10
6) Negative emotional symptoms,	75.20
7) Isolation and reduced social contact	45.50

Table 2. Factors affecting SWB of Thai marriages with foreigners during Covid-19 outbreak.

Predictor variable	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficient	t value	p<value
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	57.367	3.394		16.902	.000**

Age	-.024	.035	-.020	-.707	.048*
Physical and environment	.000	.000	-.071	-2.633	.009*
Negative emotion	-.840	.037	-.665	-22.981	.000**
Social support	.253	.034	.222	7.498	.000**
Socio-economic	.126	.025	.149	4.980	.000**

R=0.769, Adjusted R²=0.588, Mean Square=10.794, F= 167.189

Note *(p<0.05) **(p<0.01)

