SOCIAL NETWORKS OF YOUNG MIGRANTS: A CASE STUDY OF MIGRANTS FROM AN GIANG TO THE SOUTHEAST REGION, VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the multifaceted roles of social networks among young internal migrants from An Giang to Vietnam's Southeast region, a phenomenon driven by economic aspirations. Utilising a qualitative approach, the research explores how these ties influence migration decisions, facilitate integration, and shape socio-economic outcomes, particularly for Kinh, Cham, and Khmer ethnic groups. Findings reveal that while family and local community ties form a universal bedrock of support, significant differences exist in engagement with formal institutions. The Kinh and Khmer groups demonstrate more direct and extensive integration with formal economic (companies, trainers) and state institutions (police, insurance), reflecting a stronger industrial orientation. Conversely, the Cham group's networks are more inwardly focused on family

and local administration, potentially indicating distinct migration patterns or cultural priorities. The study concludes that while social networks are crucial for initial migration and ongoing support, they are often insufficient to overcome systemic challenges such as unstable employment, skill deficits, or age discrimination. This necessitates broader policy interventions, coordinated institutional efforts, and fostered community ties to facilitate better integration outcomes for diverse migrant populations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Internal migration plays a crucial role in Vietnam's socio-economic landscape, with significant movements of people from rural areas to burgeoning urban and industrial centres (Brody Lee et al, 2010). Among these demographic shifts, the migration of young individuals from agricultural provinces like An Giang in the Mekong Delta to the dynamic Southeast region stands out. This phenomenon, largely driven by economic aspirations, is well-documented by the Vietnam General Statistics Office (GSO) and other research. An Giang, characterised by its agrarian economy and position within the Mekong Delta, has historically been a significant source of out-migration. Conversely, the Southeast region, encompassing major economic hubs like Ho Chi Minh City, Binh Duong, and Dong Nai, acts as a powerful "pull" factor due to its robust industrialisation and diverse employment opportunities. Data from the GSO and related studies consistently highlight that young adults, often seeking improved wages and living conditions, constitute many of these inter-provincial migrants.

This rural-to-urban movement represents a profound demographic and socio-economic transformation across many developing nations, particularly salient in Vietnam. A significant influx of young individuals from the Mekong Delta region migrates to burgeoning urban centres such as Ho Chi Minh City and industrial zones in Dong Nai, Binh Duong, and Long An. These regions are major destinations for internal migrants, offering perceived opportunities in employment and education that are often scarce in rural areas. This movement is driven by a complex interplay of factors, usually necessitating a detailed understanding of the adaptive strategies employed by migrants in their new environments. Central to these strategies is the role of social networks, which serve as crucial conduits for information, resources, and emotional support, shaping migration decisions, facilitating integration, and influencing socio-economic outcomes in destination areas (Cummings et. al., 2015; Sha, 2021). Despite the growing recognition of the importance of social networks in migration studies, specific attention to the experiences of young rural migrants within the Vietnamese context, particularly their integration into diverse urban and industrial landscapes, remains a vital area of inquiry. This article aims to explore the multifaceted roles of social networks among young migrants from An Giang, examining how these ties influence their journey to and settlement in Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai, Binh Duong, and Long An, and offering insights into how these networks contribute to their adaptation, with particular emphasis on the distinct characteristics and functions of social networks across different ethnic groups, including the Kinh, Cham, and Khmer.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The phenomenon of rural-to-urban migration is a significant global trend, with young individuals often at its forefront. Social networks play a crucial role in shaping migration decisions, facilitating the journey, and influencing integration outcomes in destination areas. This literature review explores the dynamics of social networks among young rural-to-urban migrants.

Social network theory posits that personal ties reduce the costs and risks associated with migration, thereby increasing the likelihood of individuals migrating (Herman, 2006, as cited in Cummings et. al., 2015). These networks function as a form of "social capital," providing access to vital information and resources (Massey et al., 1993; Massey et al., 1998). Early research, such as that on Mexican migration to the USA, highlights how these networks facilitate, sustain, and perpetuate migration flows, leading to a "cumulative causation" effect where migration itself creates the social structure to sustain further movement (Massey, 1990; Massey et al., 1993).

Types of Ties: The literature distinguishes between "strong ties" (bonding capital) and "weak ties" (bridging capital). Strong ties, often found within kinship, religious, and close-knit community groups, are crucial for providing direct aid, assistance, and emotional support, particularly in the initial stages of migration and for "getting by" (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000; Weber, 2014). For young migrants, these family and close friendship networks can significantly influence the decision to migrate, provide financial support, accommodation, and initial job leads (Boyd, 1989; Heering et al., 2004; Haug, 2008; Ryan, 2011; Cummings et. al., 2015).

Weak ties, conversely, refer to looser connections with acquaintances outside the immediate circle of family or close friends. These ties are often more valuable for accessing novel information, such as job opportunities or housing in diverse geographical locations, and are essential for "getting ahead" (Granovetter, 1973; Wilson, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Weber, 2014). For young migrants seeking to integrate into urban labour markets, these bridging ties become increasingly important as they expand their social reach beyond their initial ethnic or

community enclaves.

Information vs. Cooperation Capital: Blumenstock et al. (2022) disentangle two distinct mechanisms through which social networks influence migration: as a conduit of information and as a source of social and economic support (cooperation capital). Their research, utilising mobile phone data from Rwanda, suggests that migrants are more likely to move to destinations where their social networks are interconnected (providing cooperation capital), rather than merely extensive (efficiently transmitting information). This surprising finding suggests that for the average migrant, the value of robust risk-sharing networks and social support outweighs the benefit of simply having a large number of distant contacts for information (Blumenstock et al., 2022). However, they also note heterogeneity, with repeat and long-term migrants being more drawn to extensive networks, likely due to better information about the destination (Blumenstock et al., 2022). This implies that as young migrants gain experience, the utility derived from different network structures may evolve.

2.1. Social Integration and Community Participation

Community participation, both formal and informal, is a key pathway to migrants' social integration in urban areas (Zhang et al., 2023). It helps migrants deal with inequality, marginalisation, and adaptation challenges. Key elements of community participation include leveraging social capital, utilising public spaces, and employing community participation strategies. This participation fulfils immediate needs, expands social networks, and facilitates psychological integration (Zhang et al., 2023).

However, the effectiveness of community participation in promoting social integration can be hindered if the environment is biased or lacks meaningful encounters (Zhang et al., 2023). This highlights the importance of inclusive urban environments and opportunities for genuine interaction between migrants and host communities.

2.2. Technology-Mediated Networks

Modern communication technologies, such as mobile phones and internet-based platforms, have significantly reshaped how social networks operate in relation to migration (Weber, 2014; Cummings et. al., 2015). These technologies enable migrants to maintain strong ties with families and friends in their origin countries, overcoming geographical distances and the "uprooted migrant" paradigm (Weber, 2014). This fosters a sense of belonging and community, even transnationally.

For young migrants, technology facilitates access to information and support from both origin and destination networks. While older studies noted a lack of specific knowledge on the use of technology-mediated communication among migrants (Weber, 2014), more recent evidence points to the increasing role of online and social media in informing migration decisions and connecting diverse groups (Cumming et. al., 2015). This allows for easier communication, information exchange, and potentially the formation of new connections.

Despite the benefits, social networks are not without their complexities and potential drawbacks.

- Negative Effects: While networks generally provide support, they can also lead to limited upward mobility or even exploitation. For instance, strong ties, while offering initial security, might trap migrants in low-wage, informal jobs due to obligations or a lack of connections to higher-status individuals (Weber, 2014). Competition for scarce resources within ethnic-specific networks can also lead to rivalry (Weber, 2014).

- Policy and Structural Contexts: The influence of migrant networks is not isolated but interacts dynamically with macro socio-economic and political structures, including migration policies and labour market regulations (Sha, 2021; Zell & Skop, 2011, as cited in Sha, 2021). Restrictive policies can limit network development and access to resources, particularly for irregular migrants (Sha, 2021).

- Gendered Dynamics: Social networks often influence men and women differently due to gendered social norms and household labour divisions (Hagan, 1998; Menjivar, 2006; Toma & Vause, 2014). Research suggests that women tend to rely more on close family ties and geographically concentrated networks, while men utilise both strong and weak ties (Toma & Vause, 2014). Young migrant women, in particular, may need to strategically deploy their own strategies to access and sustain social networks to overcome gendered barriers (Ryan, 2007; Toma & Vause, 2014).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data Collection Tools

In-Depth Interview In-depth interviews, in the form of conversations, help respondents feel more comfortable and willing to share information in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere (Holstein & Gubrium 1997). Respondents in in-depth interviews

construct their thoughts and beliefs by describing their lives in their own words (Valentine 1997). This technique can help respondents open up and allow researchers to understand the most complex lived experiences (Limb & Dwyer 2001), such as their identity, beliefs, daily activities, and social relationships (Levitt & Khagram 2008). The main advantage of in-depth interviews is that they provide much more detailed information than other data collection methods (Boyce & Neale 2006). Therefore, this study uses in-depth interviews to gather detailed information on migration issues that cannot be assessed in the survey, especially issues of opinions, emotions, or experiences. The research team conducted 8 (eight) semi-structured in-depth interviews with officials from the District People's Committee and the Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, officials from the An Giang Provincial Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, managers in some immigrant wards, and experts/researchers in the field of migration. The purpose of using this method is to supplement objective evaluation data from relevant parties, contributing to clarifying the research objectives of the study.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) Method Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) includes the most commonly used set of participatory assessment tools. It is a growing group of methods and approaches for learning about rural life and conditions. Chambers (1997) describes that, "PRA is a growing group of methods and approaches to enable local people to share, enhance, and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, as well as to plan, act, monitor, and evaluate." PRA has been widely used in natural resource management, agriculture, health and nutrition, poverty reduction and livelihood programs, and urban contexts. The subjects of this study originate from rural areas and move towards new urban life, and the role of migrants' social relationships is one of the contents analysed in this study; hence, the application of the PRA method is appropriate. This study implemented PRA in 3 localities with households having migrants and returned migrants, **specifically**

- Vinh Truong Commune (An Phu) with 11 Cham households
- An Cu Commune (Tinh Bien) with 10 Khmer households
- Long Dien Commune (Cho Moi) with 9 Kinh households

The research team used tools and techniques such as Historical flow, events, Resource map, Seasonal calendar, Venn diagram, SWOT analysis and Priority ranking to collect necessary information.

3.2. Data Analysis

This article applied the ethnographic analysis method, which primarily relies on direct quotes from PRA discussions or interviews (Ochieng NT et al. 2018). Therefore, this process is unsystematic and relies on the researcher's ability to label material into "themes," "discourses," or "illustrative quotes" while maintaining integrity and accounting for the context of the focus group/interview (Krippendorff, K. 2012; Ochieng NT et al. 2018).
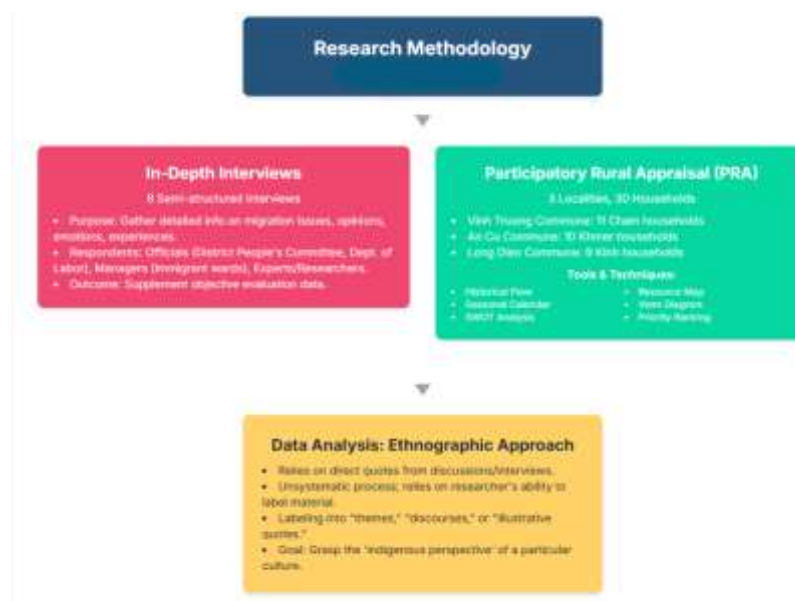

Figure 1: Summarising the Research Methodology.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, 150) argue that when applying ethnographic analysis, researchers

attempt to grasp the 'indigenous perspective' of a particular culture through the meaning of life of the members of that culture. Additionally, the sharing of young migrants about their social relationships in their places of origin and destination, and the role of these relationships in their migration process and lives in the immigrant localities, contributes to answering the questions of this study.

The overall research design and data analysis of the study is presented in Figure 1.

4. RESULTS

The influence of social ties on migration patterns is notably significant, particularly through informal connections facilitated by friends' recommendations. These ties can drive migration decisions, as evidenced by observations highlighting the fluctuations in immigrant numbers during the COVID pandemic. The disruption brought about by the epidemic resulted in a decrease in immigration due to business closures; however, following the epidemic, there was a resurgence in immigration attributable to seasonal and spontaneous migration driven by peer influence. For example, it has been observed that "the number of immigrants tends to decrease when the Covid epidemic occurs due to some companies closing, but after the epidemic, the number of immigrants increases again due to seasonal migration and spontaneous migration introduced by friends" [PVS 8, A15].

This highlights the role of peer influence in the decision to migrate. The integration and management of diverse migrant populations present considerable challenges, primarily due to the varied social and cultural backgrounds that can lead to conflicts within communities. An interviewee noted that familial gatherings, typically occurring over weekends, can sometimes escalate into conflicts, particularly because the families originate from distinct cultural groups, such as Khmer, Kinh, and Cham. "Usually, families work from Monday to Friday, but on Saturdays and Sundays, they often gather to eat and drink, leading to conflicts and fights, so their lives have different cultures such as Khmer, Kinh, some Cham people, making it difficult to manage immigrants" [PVS 4, A10].

This suggests that distinct cultural groups within the migrant community may experience social friction. In light of these challenges, there is a recognised need for stronger formal inter-provincial institutional networks that facilitate collaboration between local authorities in the migrants' areas of origin and settlement. It has been suggested that establishing regular relationships and exchanges between these local authorities would significantly enhance the management and support for migrant workers. "It is necessary to create regular relationships and exchanges between the local authorities of the emigration and immigration areas to better manage and support migrant workers" [PVS 8, A17; PVS 4, A17].

Addressing this gap in coordinated institutional support is critical for bolstering the overall social welfare and successful integration of migrant communities, allowing for the development of frameworks that better accommodate the complexities of their social environments.

Examining the social networks of young migrants from An Giang, across the Kinh, Cham, and Khmer ethnic groups, reveals both similarities and differences influenced by cultural contexts and migration experiences. A universal aspect of these networks is the centrality of family and relatives, which serves as a foundational support system. The Cham group emphasises the role of family and relatives explicitly, while the Kinh personal connections focus more on family, with the Khmer emphasising the importance of relatives. This family-oriented structure provides emotional and initial practical assistance during migration and settlement.

Additionally, the social networks of these groups also reflect the presence of local administrative bodies, such as the Commune People's Committee, indicating some reliance on governmental support. The Cham's specific reference to the Hamlet Office illustrates a localised engagement that enhances their integration. Such interactions signal a common understanding among migrants that institutional channels, despite predominantly informal ties, can provide valuable assistance. Informal personal ties — friends and neighbours — are consistently present in the networks of the Kinh and Khmer groups. These connections are crucial for daily life and serve as avenues for information exchange and initial integration into new environments, suggesting an intertwining of both formal and informal support mechanisms.

Despite these similarities, significant differences emerge, particularly in terms of engagement with formal institutions and the nature of support provided. The Kinh group exhibits a direct and extensive engagement with formal employment institutions, detailing connections to workplaces that suggest a solid orientation towards industrial work. Their networks also include entities such as the police and insurance providers, showcasing a more comprehensive interaction with state and welfare structures. Conversely, the Khmer group similarly

engages with formal institutions, incorporating connections to vocational trainers, which indicates a structured approach to navigating workplace requirements. Yet, they face challenges related to skill barriers that may hinder their full integration into the labour market.

In contrast, the Cham group conspicuously centres its networks around localised components that stress familial and community ties rather than large-scale industrial connections. This lack of explicit workplace affiliation suggests that their access to employment is less direct within their social circles, potentially leading to a more seasonal work pattern rather than a consistent industrial presence. Addressing the nature of support and the unique challenges faced by each group reveals further disparities. The Cham network's traditional characteristics offer strong community ties but may not adequately address modern economic demands, while the Khmer's connections struggle against barriers such as language and unstable work conditions. The Kinh group's alignment with

industrial roles, while providing better job access, does not shield them from systemic challenges relating to labour exploitation and pressure.

In conclusion, while informal social connections significantly influence migration and integration processes, the interplay of cultural diversity, institutional support, and the specific characteristics of each ethnic group's social network is essential in understanding the complex challenges faced by migrants in contemporary society. Addressing these intricacies through coordinated institutional efforts and fostering stronger community ties could facilitate better integration outcomes for migrants from diverse backgrounds.

The following figure provides an integrated view of the social network components for young migrants from An Giang, categorised by their Kinh, Cham, and Khmer ethnic groups. Figure 2 represents which social network components are present (marked with '1', in blue) or absent (marked with '0', in white) for each ethnic group.

Integrated Social Network Components of An Giang Migrants by

Social Network Component	Kinh	Cham	Khmer
Acquaintances	1	0	0
Commune People's Committee	1	1	1
Company/Workplace	1	0	1
Company/Workplace Trainers	0	0	1
Family/Relatives	1	1	1
Friends	1	0	1
Hamlet Office	0	1	0
Insurance	1	0	1
Neighbors	1	0	1
Police	1	0	1

Ethnic Group

Figure 2: Social Network of An Giang Migrants by Ethnic Group.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show the critical and

complex role of social networks in shaping the migration experiences of young individuals from An Giang to the Southeast region of Vietnam. Consistent with existing literature (Granovetter, 1973; Cummings et. al., 2015), social networks serve as vital conduits for information, resources, and emotional support, influencing initial migration decisions and subsequent adaptation processes. However, our analysis reveals nuanced differences in network composition and efficacy across the Kinh, Cham, and Khmer ethnic groups, highlighting the interplay of cultural context, migration patterns, and institutional engagement.

A universal commonality across all three ethnic groups is the foundational importance of family and relatives. These strong ties (bonding capital) provide immediate practical assistance, such as financial support and accommodation, and crucial emotional backing during the challenging initial stages of migration. This aligns with the concept of social capital, where personal ties reduce migration costs and risks (Massey et al., 1993; Cummings et. al., 2015). The explicit emphasis on family and relatives within the Cham group, and the focus on family for Kinh and relatives for Khmer, underscores this shared reliance on kinship as a primary support mechanism. Furthermore, the presence of local administrative bodies, such as the Commune People's Committee and the Hamlet Office (for the Cham), indicates a common understanding among migrants that formal institutional channels, even when primarily accessed through informal ties, can offer valuable assistance. Informal personal ties, including friends and neighbours, are also consistently present, particularly for the Kinh and Khmer groups, serving as crucial avenues for daily life support and initial integration.

Despite these similarities, significant disparities emerge in the extent and nature of engagement with formal institutions. The Kinh group exhibits a notably direct and extensive integration with formal employment institutions, including workplaces, police, and insurance providers. This suggests a strong orientation towards industrial employment and a more comprehensive interaction with state and welfare structures, which could facilitate greater stability and access to formal benefits. Similarly, the Khmer group demonstrates engagement with formal institutions, including vocational trainers, indicating a structured approach to skill development for the workplace. However, the study result notes that the Khmer group still faces challenges related to skill barriers, suggesting that while they seek formal training, systemic issues may hinder full labour

market integration.

In contrast, the Cham group's social networks appear more localised and inwardly focused on familial and community ties, with a conspicuous lack of explicit workplace affiliation. This suggests that their access to employment may be less direct through their social circles, potentially leading to more seasonal or informal work patterns rather than consistent industrial presence. This observation aligns with the literature on the potential negative effects of strong ties if they limit access to diverse information and higher-status opportunities (Weber, 2014). The traditional characteristics of the Cham network, while offering strong community bonds, may not adequately address the demands of modern economic landscapes, potentially contributing to more precarious employment situations.

The study highlights that while social networks are indispensable for initial migration and ongoing support, they are often insufficient to overcome broader systemic challenges. Issues such as unstable employment, lack of formal skills, age discrimination, and even cultural conflicts within diverse migrant communities (as evidenced by the interviewee's sharing of inter-ethnic friction during family gatherings) persist despite the presence of robust social ties. This finding resonates with research indicating that the effectiveness of community participation can be hindered by biased environments or lack of meaningful encounters (Zhang et al., 2023), and that network influence interacts dynamically with macro socio-economic and political structures (Sha, 2021).

The observed need for stronger formal inter-provincial institutional networks that facilitate collaboration between local authorities in areas of origin and settlement is a critical implication of this study. Such coordinated efforts are essential for better managing and supporting migrant workers, addressing gaps in social welfare, and fostering successful integration. This necessitates moving beyond reliance on informal networks alone and implementing broader policy interventions that can provide structured support, skill development opportunities, and mechanisms to mitigate cultural conflict. Ultimately, understanding the distinct characteristics and limitations of social networks across different ethnic groups is vital for designing targeted and effective policies that genuinely facilitate the adaptation and well-being of young migrants in Vietnam's dynamic urban and industrial centres.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated the intricate landscape of social networks among young migrants from An Giang, revealing their indispensable role in facilitating initial migration and offering crucial support. Our findings distinctly show that while strong family and community ties form a fundamental safety net for all ethnic groups — Kinh, Cham, and Khmer — their engagement with formal institutions varies significantly. The Kinh and Khmer groups demonstrate a more pronounced integration with formal economic and state structures, indicative of their industrial work orientations. In contrast, the Cham group's networks, while robust within family and local administration, appear less connected to formal workplaces, potentially leading to more informal or seasonal employment patterns.

The challenge highlighted is that these social networks, despite their vital contributions, are often inadequate to fully mitigate systemic barriers such as employment instability, skill deficits, and age-based discrimination. Furthermore, the presence of cultural friction within diverse migrant communities underscores the limitations of informal ties in addressing broader societal integration issues. This necessitates a strategic shift towards strengthening formal inter-provincial institutional collaborations. Such coordinated efforts between authorities in areas of origin and destination are paramount for effective migrant worker management, bridging social welfare gaps, and fostering genuine integration. Ultimately, a nuanced understanding of the distinct characteristics and limitations of social networks across these diverse ethnic groups is critical. This knowledge is essential for developing targeted and effective policy interventions that not only support the immediate needs but also genuinely enhance the long-term adaptation and well-being of young migrants within Vietnam's evolving socio-economic condition.

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