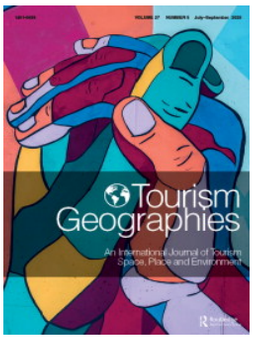

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'I hate those words, I love you!'. Care-leavers' reflections of orphanage tourism

Jonnell Uptin

Faculty of Arts and Social Science, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

While many orphanages emphasize the benefits of tourist volunteers, it is unclear whether these visits actually benefit the children. This research draws from original qualitative data highlighting the voices of nine young Thai adults who lived their childhoods in an orphanage run by Christian, foreign volunteers in Thailand. The paper examines the data taken in interviews, a focus group and member checking and reports on the young people's relationships with volunteer tourists. Their narratives reveal the ways the orphanage positioned the children as the face of the institution to promote financial gain. Now as young adults they describe being placed in precarious positions and at the mercy of tourist volunteers who were unfamiliar with their history, their language, their culture and their needs. The participants expressed deep disappointment when visitors gave hollow promises of 'forever love' but left never to be seen again. However, one volunteer was remembered for creating opportunities for the children to become leaders, showing the tourists Thailand and diverting the gaze away from the 'poor orphans'. The paper argues that the business model of orphanages, financed by foreign visitors, must prioritize the unique needs of the child in the orphanage rather than privileging tourist volunteers.

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Introduction

To be an ethical global citizen has become a complex dilemma for many in higher income countries. The rise in volunteer tourism has seen many from Western democratic countries offer their time and skills assisting those in countries deemed less fortunate. Orphanages and residential care homes have become the most popular destinations (Reid, 2020) as they are promoted throughout Western churches and schools as an altruistic, humanitarian act. Yet there is a growing concern whether these visits are in the best interest of the child (Cheney & Ucembe, 2019, Mostafanezhad, 2013). Matters

CONTACT Jonnell Uptin jonnell.uptin@sydney.edu.au Faculty of Arts and Social Science, The University of Sydney, A35 Education Building, Sydney, Australia.
Jonnell lectures in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages and Intercultural Understanding in Education at The University of Sydney

pertaining to child rights within orphanages and institutional settings have been severely overlooked, however momentum is growing for more thoughtful and rigorous examination. These include guards for child protection, consideration of child development, protection from exploitation and the development of child wellbeing, as well as facilitating child agency (van Doore & Nhep, 2023, p. 1). This article advocates that it is these principles that should guide the structural facilitation of orphanages.

The promotion of orphanage volunteerism is often presented in Western churches and NGOs as giving back, and promotes the idea that the third world needs you (Ladaphongphatthana, 2021). This discourse highlights the good works of volunteerism, which can be an admirable pursuit however, what needs consideration is how this impacts the child whose home is the orphanage. In marketizing humanitarianism, the orphaned child is presented as the innocent victim in need of saving and the volunteer as the central figure of compassion (Burrai et al., 2017, Mostafanezhad, 2013). The paternalism imbued in this discourse has longstanding roots in colonialism where the superiority of the Global North assists the inferior Global South (Burrai et al., 2017, Wilke et al., 2023). The fascination with the orphaned child and the orphanage is quite mythical in Western discourse, harking back to Charles Dickens' stories and musicals like 'Oliver' and 'Annie' where the poor, vulnerable, victim child is rescued by the rich white savior. Moreover, the evangelical movement of the early twenty-first century saw establishing orphanages amongst Global South countries as soft influence and a quest to 'save orphans' (Sinervo & Cheney, 2019). This thriving 'orphan industry' (Cheney & Ucembe, 2019, p. 37) has established networks of volunteerism to finance the institutionalization of children rather than building capacity for extended families and the local community. Yet this form of volunteering is being challenged by some, moving away from a 'shallow self-gratifying volunteering' (Bott, 2021, p. 2) toward recognition and respect for each child.

This article takes a pragmatic view of the need for orphanages as they are a signifier of how abject poverty, parental migration for work, the death of a parent, disability and HIV drives entry into institutional care (Rogers & Karunan, 2020). Indeed, the simplified solution of eradicating orphanages neglects the fact that 'poverty remains the principal cause of the violation of children's rights because lack of resources seriously impedes, or entirely prevents, access to basic human rights such as healthcare, water, food and education' (Bott, 2021, p. 3). However, what is scrutinised here is the power of the orphanage system, as it can too easily prioritise the institutional need over the children's needs, thus causing harm to those it aims to protect. The article also gives evidence of how one person navigated this system and prioritised the children's needs by empowering their position when volunteers visited, giving hope that with thoughtful planning children can be put first. The term 'institutional care' in this article includes orphanages and other residential care facilities, where children live in non-family-based group settings.

Lived experience in orphanages

Often missing, yet crucial to the conversations on institutional care in Asian societies, are the voices of those who have experienced living in orphanages (Yin, 2025, Rogers et al., 2021, Roche, 2019). In this paper, the narratives of young adults who have lived

their childhoods in an orphanage in Northern Thailand are heard. By listening to the voices of those who have lived experience, we gain important insights that only the insider can give, giving an opportunity to reflect upon what these children found critical to their own care (Child Frontiers, 2023; Dixon et al., 2019; Wilke et al., 2023). Lived experience is a significant tool in qualitative research providing a platform to learn lessons from the past. Paradoxically, many children are asked to tell their own stories to assist in funding orphanages, yet 'they have tended to be denied a voice when it comes to making decisions about their lives, both at the individual level and at the wider level of care' (Dixon et al., 2019, p. 7). While voice and visibility in research have greatly improved for care-experienced children in high income countries, a significant gap remains for low to middle income nations (Yin, 2025). Guiney (2018) writes 'there is little research into how opening spaces such as orphanages to capital-driven markets such as tourism has an impact on the children within these centres' (p. 121).

Now living independently, the nine young adults in this research told of wanting to *'tell their side of the story'* about their experience of care and their encounters with short term volunteers. All participants are orphans and have no living parents, yet some have extended family. All lived their childhoods in an orphanage funded and run by foreign volunteers. While Thai nannies were employed by the orphanage as carers, long-term foreign volunteers held leadership and administrative care roles. The heavy reliance upon churches, from the global North for funding enable visiting rights for those who donate, henceforth 'the Third World child has become a dominant signifier of modern humanitarianism' (Mostafanezhad, 2013, p. 333). Discussions of encounters with short-term foreign volunteers contrast with romanticised versions of the volunteer industry promoting tourists as 'white saviours'.

Volunteer tourism and the marginalisation of children

Despite the rapid growth of orphanage tourism over the last twenty years, the literature is relatively small and largely concentrates on the perspective of volunteers from the Global North (Cheer, 2018, Freidus & Caro, 2018, Guiney, 2018, Proyrungroj, 2017). Much of the research concentrates on identifying what motivates volunteers toward assisting Global South communities (Proyrungroj, 2017, Mostafanezhad, 2013). The fascination with cultural difference, and the opportunity to interact and become a change agent, are cited as main drivers (Freidus & Caro, 2018). Much of the positioning as to what is helpful has been Western-centric, and there has emerged some recognition of the quest of 'doing good for self' (Proyrungroj, 2017) rather than those they are helping. Freidus & Caro (2018) take this understanding further by revealing that for many Christians, it is a quest to find their authentic self and enjoy an improved relationship with God. Mostafanezhad (2013) identifies this movement as a 'geography of compassion' where the neoliberal ethic views the volunteer as a 'moral consumer' travelling and assisting the impoverished world with virtuous labour. However, this stance requires greater scrutiny asking the question; Compassion toward who? Is it compassion toward the orphanage as a structural system or toward the children held within its grasp? While the answer to many is of compassion toward the child, the reality presented in this article by the young adults who have experienced this care

show how the power relationships can indeed inflict a structural violence upon the child it poses to protect.

Research into whether orphanages benefit children across Asian countries is small but growing, following the United Nations Resolution on the Rights of the Child (2010) stating that 'orphanages don't protect children, they harm them' (paragraph 14). While voice and visibility in research have greatly improved for care-experienced children in high income countries, a significant gap remains for low to middle income nations (Yin, 2025). Guiney (2018) writes 'there is little research into how opening spaces such as orphanages to capital-driven markets such as tourism has an impact on the children within these centres' (p. 121). Yet it has been documented that owners and caretakers' profit from opening orphanages to tourist volunteers (Ladaphongphatthana, 2021, Doore, 2020). A similar study of adult care leavers' living in Northern Thailand by Child Frontiers (2023) reported that the care leavers saw they had benefited from being taught English and Chinese by tourist volunteers. However, 'respondents explained that interactions with volunteers or visitors could pose challenges, leading to discomfort and misunderstandings when foreign volunteers were overly physical with children, especially across genders' (p. 39). The investigation revealed that providers were unaware of the potential risks associated with volunteer involvement having limited knowledge of child protection protocols.

One potent argument asserted within the discourse of tourist volunteers in orphanages highlights what Cheer (2018) frames as a 'geography of marginalisation', making a distinction between it and a 'geography of compassion' (Mostafanezhad, 2013, p. 318). A 'geography of marginalisation' places the child in the orphanage at the centre of the discourse and not the tourist, 'giving marginalization and social justice concerns proportional weighting' (Cheer, 2018, p. 730). It opens opportunities to examine how care is structured ensuring that the child's needs for safety, privacy and dignity are not placed at the margins but are embedded into policies and practices. By asserting that the orphanage industry is a 'geography of marginalisation' opens further inquiry into how children can be placed as attractions like animals in a zoo and how their vulnerabilities can be manipulated through a lack of agency. It gives room for dialogue proposing ideas and actions around what works and is in the best interest of the child. It can also work toward accountability for the marginalised subject whereby the particular needs of the child in an orphanage can be articulated and acted upon.

How institutional care can marginalise and perpetuate structural violence toward children

As the business model for orphanages depends upon donations from more affluent countries there is therefore a transactional obligation for orphanage administrators to demonstrate the need for their existence (Rotabi et al., 2017). Volunteer tourists are rewarded for their donations by gaining firsthand experience to look, to touch and 'to love' the children in the orphanage. The child is therefore captured within their own home and surveyed by strangers as objects of fascination. This 'geography of marginalization' (Cheer, 2018) acts as structural violence toward these children and thus positions the child at the bottom of the hierarchy of the orphanage system as voiceless, helpless victims who need saving. The concept of structural violence

(Galtung, 1969) describes how harm toward a consolidated group (in this case children in orphanages) takes place within society, it is not direct but manipulates a hierarchical structure that disempowers those placed at the bottom (Ljungblom, 2015). 'The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal chances' (Galtung, 1969, p. 171). This type of violence is built into the institutional system and doesn't meet the basic needs of the consolidated group, nor does it resource them to reach their full potential. However, if marginalized voices are heard by those high in the hierarchical order (in this case long-term foreign volunteers) change can be actualized.

Yet, to fully appreciate the extent of marginalisation of Thailand's most vulnerable children we must take a broader national view. The Kingdom of Thailand is an upper-middle income nation in Southeast Asia, yet it has highest disparity of wealth between rich and poor citizens in the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), with 0.7% of the population controlling 67% of the country's wealth and the bottom 10% of the population holding 0% of the country's wealth (World Bank Group, 2024). Thus, manipulating a hierarchical structure where the bottom 10% face extreme poverty. The hard-working poor usually work six to seven days a week for up to or more than twelve hours a day with no facilities for childcare, driving a need for an orphanage industry (Child Frontiers, 2023). Bolotta's (2021) research examining the lives of the slum children of Bangkok illustrates that the *dek salum* (slum children) are so marginalised that they are considered as non-Thai by society. For such parents, orphanages can too often be the only provision for their children. Thai governments have accommodated the marketing of a volunteer visa to Western countries by The Authority of Thailand (TAT), attracting mostly Christian volunteers to build orphanages (Proyrungroj, 2017). It has enabled Western churches to send long-term volunteers with different religions, languages and cultural values to become *Mae and Por* (Mother and father) to their most vulnerable citizens, children in orphanages.

As institutional care settings in Thailand largely go unmonitored by authorities, neither health nor the harm of these children are identified. A recent survey, in 2022 by Safe Child Foundation, found 679 private institutional care homes of which 390 are unregistered. Within Thailand, 'at least 120,000 children are in various institutional care settings', yet authorities admit that there are many undocumented children throughout Thailand (Ladaphongphatthana et al., 2023, p. 1). Of consequence to such systematic neglect is the lack of scrutiny in the system as over 50% of private orphanages are unregistered and operating outside the country's legal framework (Ladaphongphatthana et al., 2023). Thus, structural violence is demonstrated by a lack of systematic regulation to protect children from opportunities for child abuse, neglect, and crimes against children.

Looking at orphanage volunteerism through the eyes of the care leavers

This paper adds to the knowledge of how children view their lives growing up in orphanages. It accommodates the views of these young people who saw many unknown adults from faraway lands walk into their home, their bedrooms, their playgrounds and then leave. Yet it also tells of how some of those from far away gave them continual connection and skills for their future. Upon identifying this

volunteering as a unique phenomenon to orphanage settings, the young adults discussed the implications of these visits and visitors upon their own identity formation and development. In their retelling, the young adults make their own distinctions about who is in their inner and outer circle using the word (*pho yiam*) visitor for all tourist volunteers and *mae* or *por* (mother or father) for long-term foreign volunteers. Resonating with how the young adults positioned themselves, Uptin and Hartung (2023) write,

'Far from reinforcing simplistic ideas of orphans as passive victims or resilient superheroes, or orphanages as grim prisons or liberating sanctuaries, the young people's narratives of care hold space for a range of experiences and emotions including anger, sadness, shame, strength, and joy' (p. 12).

In the retelling of their own stories the young adults are agentic, using the research project to reflect upon their own attitudes, giving voice to their concerns and reconstructing narratives that accommodate their perspectives.

Methodology

The larger research from which this article is drawn examines institutionalised orphanage life from the perspective of young adults who have grown up in care. It asked, 'How do Thai orphans find an adult identity after spending a childhood in an orphanage'? It draws upon and positions the young adults as bearers of human rights and 'recognises the child as a full human being who has the ability to participate freely in society' (Singh & Jha, 2017). The research questions were intentionally broad to allow the participants to lead the narratives, to express their own thoughts and perceptions ensuring authenticity and assuring that no assumptions by the researcher were being constituted.

Main research questions

- How do young people, who grew up in a Thai orphanage, understand and respond to the care given to them as an orphan? and
- How have these experiences of care informed their sense of self, and relationships as young adults?
- How did the orphanage prepare the children for independent living?

There were not any direct questions regarding volunteers nor tourist volunteers, these themes emerged when analysing the data.

Background to the study

To understand the context of this study more broadly, the researcher's own connection to the participants and orphanages needs explanation. The researcher began volunteering soon after the orphanage had been opened by two Christian women missionaries, at the height of the AIDS epidemic, in Northern Thailand. It was registered and had the authority to care for ethnic Thai children. Long- term foreign volunteers were

in administration positions and all decisions for care. Thai nannies held functional paid positions such as cooking, cleaning and daily care for the children. The researcher stayed for eight years, first volunteering full time and when finances ran out, working as a teacher in an international school, becoming a part-time volunteer and known as an 'auntie'. This in turn gave the researcher a unique position in the institutional structure, with less stakes in the orphanage and having an 'insider/outsider' status. Upon returning to Australia some of the relationships continued. When one of the girls became pregnant at 17, the researcher was asked to become grandmother and regularly returns to Thailand to enjoy the connections with the young adults who now live independently. This unique standpoint brought changes in power relations as the young people found freedom in their independence, working and creating new friendship networks but still needing support when challenges became overwhelming.

The idea for a research project came about over time and dialogue with some of the young women, as detailed in field notes from late 2019:

The girls knew I had 'written a book' (my PhD) and they had (at first jokingly) asked me to write their stories, expressing concern about how they were portrayed as 'poor orphans' in the orphanage promotional material. Sal (pseudonym) told me that the reason that many trusted me was that I was adopted; that I knew what it was like to be left alone.

Reflecting upon this statement alerted me to the trust I had been given and the duty to allow for a space where the young adults could tell their interpretations of a life lived in an orphanage. Some of the stories were personally hard to hear because I too had been a volunteer who had left them and gone to live in Australia. I too had walked in and out of the orphanage at my convenience as the 'aunty' who came to visit. I had taken photos and back in Australia I had received much kudos for being so selfless and working in an orphanage. This research therefore becomes an act of Truth Telling, that brings the perspective of those children who were in care to the forefront.

Recruitment

A purposeful sampling approach was taken whereby all participants in the study had lived their childhood in an orphanage. Flyers explaining the research were distributed across institutional care settings known to the author however, they garnered little response. Interest was shown by some of the young people who were known to the researcher. One participant, who was studying at university and understood the concept of research, undertook to encourage others to join by texting, 'It's time to tell our side' And 'you can say anything you want,' which was possibly an overreach, but enthusiastic. This snowballing effect encouraged active interest and to mitigate coercion a translator (not previously known to the participants) followed up by explaining verbally the information and consent forms, the research process and participant rights. The participants had time to ask questions and consider their involvement. After giving the information, two chose not to proceed, stating that looking back on their lives was too hard.

Participants

All the participants in this study are double orphans (both parents have died), are ethnic Thais with full Thai citizenship status. They lived together in the same Christian orphanage that had the capacity to house 100 children (numbers fluctuated over the years). All were under the age of five upon entering the orphanage, most stayed until 18 years.

Listed below are details the nine participants who contributed their voice in research. All have been given pseudonyms (Table 1).

Data collection and analysis

Data collection comprised as semi-structured one-hour interviews, and a two-hour focus group of nine participants. Member checking became an important part of the research as clarification and interpretation from Thai to English needed consolidation, however, member checking took place after the Covid lockdown. It was intentional to choose a translator, a Thai woman, who was not known to participants nor had any connection to orphanages to maintain confidentiality. The interviews were not individual, as each participant asked to be accompanied by another participant for support. Some had two support persons. Each took it in turn to be the focus person in the interviews. The support person also provided hugs and at times humour. The data became richer due to this small group interviewing process.

Reflecting upon the interviews and the focus group I was aware of my positioning as an older *falung* (white) woman in the lives of the young adults. There were times when I felt as though I was being tested. When a swear word or a statement of anger toward the orphanage was made there were looks directed intensely at me (the researcher, the ex-volunteer, the grandmother). My reactions must have passed their scrutiny because in many instances the outbursts were explained and extended.

Table 1. Overview of cited participants.

Name (pseudonym)	Gender & age	Past and current circumstances
Samorn	Female 25	Entered the orphanage at 5 years old. Her grandmother was a regular visitor but too frail to look after her. At the time of interview, she was attending university and working fulltime, living in a one room apartment near Niran.
Hom	Female 25	Entered the orphanage as a four-year-old and left at 15 years old. At the time of interview, she was working fulltime and living with her partner and two children.
Niran	Male 24	Entered the orphanage as a newborn baby. At the time of interview, he was working in a job that pays 'danger money'[1] and living in a one room apartment near Samorn.
Ying	Female 24	Entered the orphanage at five years of age. At the time of interview, she was looking for work and living in a one room apartment with her boyfriend.
Doy	Male 23	Could not remember when he came to the orphanage. Working as gardener. Lives in a room beside a house where he also raises chickens selling the eggs.
Nok	Female 26	Came to the orphanage as a baby. Working as a nanny. Lives in employers' family home.
Gif	Male 24	Came to the orphanage as a baby. Working as a labourer.
Nam	Female 24	Came to the orphanage as a baby. Fostered by a foreign couple for a short time then returned to the orphanage.

Comments over the participant's attitude to the data collection were as follows; *I want to say my side of the story* (Samorn's words) *without feeling I am wrong in feeling this way* (as Ying put it). At times I was asked to give my opinion, even my judgement. My response was always to place value upon each of the participants' opinion giving them the right to own their own story.

The data was translated and transcribed into English, whilst the researcher was in Thailand. Thematic analysis occurred in Australia using inductive reading and rereading approach. The themes of relationships with foreign volunteers both long term and tourist volunteers were identified as important, interestingly relationships with Thai nannies were not mentioned. Rationale could be that the chief researcher was once a foreign volunteer, and her physical presence influenced what the participants discussed, or it could be that they saw that the cultural and social power in the orphanage belonged to the foreigners thus impacting what they could and couldn't do or be.

Limitations

The number of participants in this study is small, and all came from one orphanage. As such the results cannot be generalized to all orphans in all orphanages. Within this group of nine, a depth of conversation came from the young women participants. This could be because the researcher is female, and connections of talking were already established. Perhaps also these young women were at a point to reflect upon their old life with their new, renegotiating their own perspectives upon their lives.

Similar to the Child Frontiers study (2023), the participants in this study can also be seen as leading successful lives in that they are all employed and independent, while other care-leavers who were struggling with the law, health and employment didn't respond to recruitment. The data was taken at two specific times and were therefore the thoughts and ideas of the young care-leavers at that moment in time.

Ethical considerations

Ethics was approved by The University of Sydney. In researching vulnerable young people consideration of the power relations between researcher and participants were considered in multiple ways.

- In recruitment, follow up was conducted by the Thai interpreter.
- Participants chose the extent of their involvement and when and where the interview took place.
- Participants were reimbursed monetarily for their time

The steps that were taken to mitigate retraumatizing participants included

- Provision of a counsellor on hand by phone during interviews.
- A pre interview discussion and practice in using non-verbal cues to pause or stop were given.
- Soft toys were placed near the participants to hold if needed.
- Water and Thai *knoms* (nibbles) were provided in interviews.

- After the interview participants were encouraged to take a walk with support people.
- After the focus group a spaghetti dinner was provided cooked by the researcher (this was a request from the participants).

Findings

At the beginning of each interview the participants expressed gratitude to the orphanage for shelter, food and clothing. They acknowledged the foreign care givers who had left their home countries to provide a place for them to live in the orphanage. Having lost both parents, there was a recognition that without this care, they might not be alive. Ying was the exception to this beginning with the following remarks,

> Ying: I hate those words, '*I love you,*' '*I love you*'!

Hearing these words, '*I love you*' spoken in English, in a sweet, sarcastic tone, were confronting and unexpected. Ying said the words while patting Samorn. Samorn responded by patting her back and responding with *'aaa*www.' The three girls understood the meaning of these words, but I (as a researcher) didn't, and asked, 'What do you mean?' Why do you hate these words? The girls studied me intensely, with a look of 'how can you not know this?'. Ying explained:

> Ying: When I was little, I believed them. They [volunteers] would hug you and give you sweets and make you open your heart. I think, oh, they love me, I have found someone for *me*'. They would say, '*I love you. I will never forget you*'. Then they are gone! Never come back. Huh. I would sit and cry and my heart would hurt. But they were gone. They never came back. I hate it! Can you see?
>
> Samorn: I think this love they give, it is like the milk for a cat, drink it fast because it will rot in the sun (they nod).

The intensity of Ying's delivery gives insights into how she felt about being placed in a position of vulnerability. Her orphanhood was exposed to whoever visited. As a child, she longed for the warm connection that comes with being loved and significant to an adult. But to the visiting volunteer Ying saw herself as a plaything. The role-play between the young women showed their contempt for their own situation and for the people who delivered this 'cheap love'. They knew they were being subjectified, that their own humanity was not equal to that of the volunteer tourist. By experiencing this type of abandonment so many times they express doubt at achieving a rich, long lasting, committed relationship. Now as a young woman the words 'I love you' that should build hope, self-acceptance and connection inflict mistrust and trauma.

Similarly, other research testifies to the harsh effect that is caused upon children when tourist volunteers break bonds and leave for good (Child Frontiers, 2023). Cheney and Ucembe (2019) ethnographic research in an orphanage in Uganda saw similar vulnerabilities in children.

> Children may bond with volunteers but are repeatedly abandoned by them, causing the children to eventually fail to attach to any one caregiver. This ultimately leads to lifelong attachment and trust issues that make it even more difficult to either reunite children with their birth families (p. 48).

Ying's words add a depth to the of impact of such liaisons upon a child. As this was the very first thing Ying spoke of in her interview it can be considered to be her most important issue. The 'love' she received broke her.

Samorn invokes a pictorial example of what this love looked like to Ying and herself comparing themselves to a cat drinking the milk. In the 'game of love' they learnt to drink quickly, diminishing the souring disappointment that lay ahead. Ying and Samorn see themselves not as children in need of caring long-term relationships with adults but as a cat that silently drinks what is left for them. In depicting their status similar to cats, Samorn depicts the child's positioning in the hierarchy within the orphanage system. The orphanage needs these relationships for financial gains and the child suffers. Rotabi et al. (2017) describe this type of relationship as a form of 'altruistic exploitation' (p. 648), where the benefits of such behaviour are for the tourist volunteers and the child is left bereft. This type of structural violence can too easily go unnoticed. Ying's sarcastic expression of the words '*I love you*' reveals a justifiable anger to being subjectified and put in zoo-like conditions.

Developing transactional relationships with tourist volunteers

In the focus group with all nine participants the question was asked, 'If you were the boss of the orphanage what would you change to make it better for children'? This garnered strong replies asserting that volunteers should not have favourites and that every child should be allowed to go out on their own with friends away from the orphanage. Nok initiated the claim that tourist volunteers (visitors) should come when they were at school as they were annoying. The young women in the group agreed joking and talking about the ways they had avoided the tourist volunteers. They spoke of staying longer to do homework in the homework room with the nannies as only Thai speakers could assist them; helping the nannies in the kitchen; pretending not to understand English so that they didn't have to have a conversation and hiding within the crowd of orphanage children so as not to be singled out. Now as young adults they question why people want to look into their bedrooms or watch them eat.

There was an exception to this, Niran, who plays football as an adult had listened to the young women talking and shook his head.

> Niran Yeh, but those *falungs* (white people) can play football and I learnt some good tricks, Thais don't teach you that.

Thus, interactions with tourist volunteers were seen as transactional in nature, they could be of benefit to the child, but to some of the participants they were invasive, interrupting their daily lives.

Additionally, the transient nature of these volunteers was problematic in multiple ways. Many volunteers only stayed for a short period but would raise money in their home country then return years later. The children were expected to remember the names of those who returned and how they had helped the orphanage. Many coped with this by detaching themselves emotionally but still enjoying the fruits of the return visit.

> At one point in the focus group Ning told the others that Mae S (a long-term volunteer) was upset and angry with some of the young men who had been in the orphanage with them. All were interested and listened to what the boys had done. She told of a visit from

> a short-term volunteer who had visited many times and returned after a long absence and took the boys out to a restaurant. The boys had ordered the best food on the menu and ate everything without much conversation, they then left without saying thank you. Ning said that Mae S was very angry as this visitor had helped her raise a lot of money for the orphanage. All the listeners shrugged or nodded but no one commented, they moved on to the next part of the conversation in the focus group.

The silent response to this story is an interesting one. I suggest that the young men in this story were acting with the same ambivalence as they had experienced from the visiting volunteers who came, who gave something to the orphanage and left. They had practiced the contractual relationship between the orphan and the volunteer throughout their childhood. Volunteer feeds me - I am grateful. However, this time the young men did not keep their part of this agreement, they did not thank the volunteer. They were not grateful, thus offending the long- term and visiting volunteer. Upon hearing the story, the response by the focus group was met with the same ambivalence. Had these young people had enough of even *drinking the milk* from tourist volunteers and moved on to control their own lives?

Feelings of exploitation by the orphanage

At the end of her interview, Samorn again asked for assurance of anonymity. She told of one day being able to tell her story her way as it could benefit other children, but she expressed fear of exposure.

> Samorn: I am all over the internet as the poor, poor orphan girl. (In the video) I'm crying because I miss my mother. She died and they videoed me crying. I'm terrified my new friends will find it. I change how I look, so I can't be found. Do you think they will find out it is me?

The use of videoing children in orphanages has been an effective tool promote the plight of marginalized Thai children in poverty, creating a discourse that parades the 'poor orphans" vulnerabilities and suggests that it is only people in Western countries that have the compassion to provide. This is a powerful discourse promoted by many orphanages (Cheney & Ucembe, 2019, Ladaphongphatthana, 2021). For Samorn and other children in the orphanages like her, marketizing their stories of orphanhood and poverty have left them with a lifelong legacy of shame and humiliation (Rotabi et al., 2017). Now as young adults, the realization of how they have been portrayed as children brings mistrust and anxiety. This factor alone was given by two care-leavers, as to why they did not want to participate in the research. They stated they are still visible on You Tube clips, one told of crying for their mother because she had 'sinned as a prostitute' and therefore did not trust any form of reporting on their childhoods.

These acts were reinterpreted by Samorn.

> People say you should live for this, live for God but God don't see me, He see –- (name of the orphanage). God changes things for the orphanage but not for me.

The message conveyed here shows the dominance of a system that cannot see when nor how structural violence is inflicted upon the individual child.

When one volunteer puts the needs of children first

Upon returning to Thailand after Covid, I met with some participants for member checking. Nok, Samorn and Hom met together. They led the conversation by wanting to talk about a short-term volunteer who had recently passed away. Por B (Father B) was an Australian who grew up in Thailand and spoke fluent Thai. Twice a year Por B would come to the orphanage, first alone, where he would make the plans and then a team from Australia would arrive to volunteer, doing manual work at the orphanage. The young women had grown up with Por B. This time they spoke to me in both English and Thai.

> Nok: He never forget us. He always come back. He come every year - Christmas time. He would come in July too. (Shaking her head) Never forget.
>
> Researcher: What did you like about him?
>
> Nok: So much fun. You know how he have team, but we his team too.
>
> Samorn: She means we were responsible to look after the Aussie team. You know before, you ask us, 'Who teach you independence?' Well [it was] Por B, he teach us, we had a job [when Por B would come]. We were team leaders. He ask us, Where will we take this group? What will we show them?
>
> Nok: I like ten pin [bowling].
>
> Samorn: We have to look after the Aussies. We need to speak Thai [for them] and help, and Por B give us money and we are the leaders and in charge.
>
> Nok: Yes, yes (clapping her hands). It's soooo fun. We get to go out and we get to buy things that everyone needs. I look after two people and say, what do you want to eat? I have to talk English. I find something they have never ever eat and I say try, try. We all know the food is hot, hot, hot and we watch and laugh and laugh. Ohhh, so good. (Begins to cry) Oh I will miss Por B – he so kind.

Working alongside Por B was seen by the young women in a completely different light to the tourist volunteers who came to look at them in the orphanage. While Por B had power within the orphanage to bring volunteer tourists, he chose to do this differently. He organised to position the older children, not as subjects of pity or victims but gave them agency and roles to fulfill. They had built a relationship with Por B, who '*always came back',* revealing the importance of consistency in their connection. Por B used his skills as a teacher to enable them to become responsible for assisting the volunteers. Thus, bringing them from the margins into the centre of decision making and allowing them to contribute in more equitable ways. The older children chose where to go, to have money and to present themselves as competent older children. This gave them a confidence that, they claim, has helped them shape their future selves. The young women saw themselves as a valued member of a team. This contrasted with much of their institutionalised lives, where freedom to make individual decisions around food, clothing, or what activity to do, was not implemented. Being included, for these young women, meant they were worthy of trust; they were seen as having knowledge, and belonged to a bigger purpose, where they had an element of control over their lives.

Samorn, Nok and Hom discussed how Por B related to the boys. This was recognised as important, because most of the carers in the orphanage were women. Por B's athleticism was revered by the boys.

Hom Every boy think Por B is their best friend (They laugh).

Nok He just don't play football, he make so many games with football and everybody play.

Hom He notice everybody, even my boy is little. He make a game for little boys too.

Samorn Who will do this now?

The grief the young women were feeling was not only for the loss of a very dear friend, but also the recognition of his contribution to their childhood happiness and learning independence. The realisation that those children, remaining in the orphanage, would not have such input and be relegated to the margins of decision making in their growing up, brought a deep sadness to the young women.

Nok With *falungs* (Foreigners) you cannot tell who goes away or who comes back.

Samorn They say 'I will come [back]', but you don't know. Por B you know he will come again and again. He not forget us.

Similarly, these young people will not forget Por B. His unique perspective on volunteering was consistent and well planned. It was designed to equip the older children at the orphanage to grow in dignity and self-determination.

The impact of one volunteer brings a juxtaposition on volunteering away from simply catering to the desires of the visitor. The intentional organisation of Por B to benefit the children by giving appropriate responsibility, is seen as a humanitarian act bringing dignity and rich connectedness for the children. He designed visits that effectively turned the gaze away from the 'poor orphans,' and acknowledged them as children with capacity and competence. The gaze of the visiting volunteers was then directed toward Thailand itself, in all its uniqueness. The older children were given the position of knowledge holders; they could use their English and give their insider knowledge of Thailand. This model of volunteering puts the child's need to grow toward independence at the centre of care.

Conclusion

This paper has examined young Thai adults' perceptions of volunteer tourists while growing up in an orphanage. It explores the complexities of these relationships within the orphanage system by highlighting the children's different encounters with tourist volunteers. The young people spoke of the many times they had suffered under a hierarchical structure that privileged the needs of tourist volunteers so that the orphanage system could be financed. There was also a recognition of when kindness and thought for their own welfare was enacted by volunteers bringing tourists.

The young adults openly expressed their childhood vulnerabilities. They told of longing to receive consistent long-lasting relationships but finding themselves to be part of a short term 'love' game that reduced them to emptiness after the volunteer had gone. They discussed the transactional nature of life in an orphanage where

volunteer tourists can bring benefits but also interfere in their home life. They express their anger at being commodified and exploited by the orphanage system in promotional material to obtain finances. However, they also gave respect to one volunteer who organized a system where the children were empowered in leading volunteer tourists to tourist places, teaching them leadership skills. This model of volunteering gave the children dignity supporting their personal development. What stands out is that the young adults were insightful in discerning the motives of the tourist volunteers showing their understanding of who sincerely cared for their welfare and wellbeing.

As changes in care for orphaned children progress around the world, the voices of young adults such as these bring important insights into how they want to be treated. This paper highlights the cultural inconsistencies from Western countries and in particular, Christian organizations, where family values are promoted at home but in lower income countries the same organizations support the institutionalization of children. It advocates that the child's needs, wherever they live, must be put far above institutional needs and it gives a clear example as to how this can be achieved.

Note

1. 'Danger money' is given to employees that are asked to risk their lives in their work. For Niran it was climbing electrical poles to fix electrical wires.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Jonnell Uptin**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation.

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Notes on contributor

Dr. Jonnell Uptin is an Academic Fellow in the School of Education and Social Work, Faculty of Social Science at The University of Sydney.

ORCID

Jonnell Uptin http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5619-1764

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