

The Making and Transnationalization of an Ethnic Niche: Vietnamese Manicurists¹

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The article addresses how Vietnamese immigrant women developed an urban employment niche in the beauty industry, in manicuring. They are shown to have done so by creating a market for professional nail care, through the transformation of nailwork into what might be called McNails, entailing inexpensive, walk-in, impersonal service, in stand-alone salons, nationwide, and by making manicures and pedicures *de rigueur* across class and racial strata. Vietnamese are shown to have simultaneously gained access to institutional means to surmount professional manicure credentializing barriers, and to have developed formal and informal ethnic networks that fueled their growing monopolization of jobs in the sector, to the exclusion of non-Vietnamese. The article also elucidates conditions contributing to the Vietnamese build-up and transformation of the niche, to the nation-wide formation of the niche and, most recently, to the transnationalization of the niche. It also extrapolates from the Vietnamese manicure experience propositions concerning the development, expansion, maintenance, and transnationalization of immigrant-formed labor market niches.

Many ethnic groups cluster in distinct types of jobs, known as ethnic niches (Lieberson, 1980; Light and Gold, 2000; Waldinger, 1994; Wilson, 2003). Vietnamese involvement in nail care, the focus of this article, is illustrative of one such ethnic niche (Huynh, 1996; Parmley, 2002; Vo, 2003; Doan, 2004; Lazar, 2005; Bui, 2007). But sociological analyses

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of ethnic group employment in general, and of ethnic niches in particular, to date have inadequately documented and explained Vietnamese involvement in the development, expansion, transformation, and even transnationalization, of the nail-care niche.

After briefly reviewing extant literature on ethnic niche formation and dynamics relevant for understanding the Vietnamese niche, the article contains an elucidation, respectively, of the evolution of professional nail-care work in the U.S. and Vietnamese involvement in it, conditions contributing to Vietnamese build-up and transformation of the niche, and, finally, Vietnamese expansion of the niche across country borders. The article concludes with propositions inductively extrapolated from the Vietnamese manicure experience about the evolution of immigrant labor market niching. The analysis draws primarily on published primary and secondary source material.² Information about the transnationalization of the U.S. Vietnamese manicure niche to Vietnam comes from interviews with a few manicurists in Vietnam.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ETHNIC NICHEs

To begin, how to define an ethnic niche? Waldinger and Bozorgmehr (1996:33), and Waldinger and D.-M (2001):237), use demographic criterion. According to them, niche formation rests on an ethnic group accounting for a greater percent of persons employed in a line of work than their share of the overall labor force. Under such circumstances, the group is “overrepresented” in the form of employment. Specifically, Waldinger and collaborators define a niche as work employing minimally 1,000 people, in which a group’s share is at least 150 percent of its share of the total labor market.

²Thanh-nghi Nguyen conducted the research on Vietnamese manicurists for this article. Although this article draws primarily on statistical and secondary source data, in conjunction with her dissertation she interviewed 32 nail salon owners and technicians in the Boston area, using snowball sampling. Interviewees were asked questions about their biographic backgrounds, transnational ties, work histories, work conditions and their views toward the work conditions, how they became involved in nailwork, relations with co-ethnic manicurists, work aspirations, and training and licensing experiences. In Vietnam a few manicurists were interviewed about how the manicure niche evolved there. For more detail about the interviews, *see* Nguyen, 2010. These interviews helped in developing an understanding of Vietnamese involvement in the nail niche, even though they are not specifically cited in this article, which Susan Eckstein wrote.

In the U.S. historically, different immigrant groups have been associated with different labor market niches. Within a given macro context, the specific niches foreign-born have occupied has rested on (1) their offering goods and services previously unavailable, for which there is demand or for which they created demand; (2) their displacing native-born, when more skilled, disciplined, or willing to labor for less money at the work; and (3) their filling jobs native-born vacated upon accessing preferred jobs. Ethnic group association with particular niches may also rest on exclusionary practices of more powerful, established groups in the society at-large who use their influence to monopolize jobs they prefer, while creating demand for other work that they have no interest in providing. No matter, the process by which immigrant groups have become associated with particular work has hinged on the interplay between assets and dynamics of the group on the one hand, and institutional conditions in particular times and places on the other hand.

The so-called new immigrants, who moved to the U.S. since the 1965 immigration reform went into effect (which opened legal immigration opportunities for peoples from developing countries, in eliminating national quotas), include Vietnamese. However, Vietnamese only moved to the U.S. in large numbers since the Vietnamese War ended in 1975. In that they arrived as the U.S. shifted from an industrial to a service-based economy, if they clustered in distinctive segments of the labor market, they might be expected to do so both in new service sector jobs native-born, for whatever reason, did not fill and in remaining industrial jobs native-born abandoned when obtaining service sector work they preferred. Examples of service sector niches filled by new immigrants include Koreans in grocery businesses, Hispanics in domestic cleaning and home care, Asian-Indians in motel management and information technology (IT), and Filipinos in nursing (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Parreñas, 2005; Min, 2006; Brettell and Alstatt, 2007). Many of the new immigrant labor market clusterings, with some important exceptions (*e.g.* Asian-Indians in IT), involve jobs that pay poorly, that are physically demanding, that entail unhealthy work conditions, and that involve long, irregular, and undesirable hours of work, in essence, jobs the native-born, with better options, rather not assume (Ong, Bonacich, and Cheng, 1994).

Ethnic group niches may become so entrenched that they take hold nationwide, beyond the local labor market where first formed. Indeed, ethnic groups tend to occupy the same line of work across the U.S.

(Waldinger, 1994:312). We will show that dynamics contributing to the “nationalization” of an ethnic niche may even contribute to its transnationalization. The original niche formation in one labor market may provide a building block on which the niche expands geographically, including across country borders.

In the U.S., there is a labor market hierarchy with which immigrant and ethnic niches are associated (Waldinger, 1994:312). Overall, Asian immigrant groups fill the most economically desirable niches, Hispanics the least desirable. Studies report that among Asians, Vietnamese (along with Cambodians and Laotians), the least educated on average, are concentrated in the lowest paying, least prestigious jobs, although not in specific labor market niches (*see, for e.g.,* Rumbaut, 1989; Gold, 1992; Wilson, 2003; Do, 2006). While Vietnamese have been found to be “overrepresented” in manual labor jobs that have survived the macro industry-to-service economy restructuring, in 1990 in Greater Los Angeles, where the largest concentration of Vietnamese live, ethnic labor market specialization reportedly was less among Vietnamese than among Asian-Indians, and especially less than among Mexicans. Their rate was roughly the same as among Filipinos and Chinese, while greater than among Koreans and Cubans (Waldinger, 1994:260, 310-12).³ And Vietnamese labor market concentration in Los Angeles declined slightly between 1980 and 1990.

Institutional conditions that contribute to immigrant group “niching” are partly state-based, linked to regulatory policies. Policies of possible consequence include job-related training and licensing requisites, and rights and benefits extended (or not) to immigrants, such as access to “green cards” (and, accordingly, access to public sector jobs and to private sector jobs involving employers who wish avoid fines for non-compliance with immigrant labor laws) and to refugee benefits that subsidize schooling, job and language training, and loans. Such policies do not necessarily predetermine the particular work immigrants do,⁴ but they make specific lines of work more or less accessible (Waldinger, 2008). The regulations result in illegal immigrants being pressed to do the least desirable and least regulated labor market work.

³Waldinger found Vietnamese employment concentration, however, to be less than that of Cuban and West Indian immigrants.

⁴Notable exceptions in the U.S. include immigrants who come on temporary job visas, for particular work, such as Indians in the high-tech sector, and agricultural workers.

Non-governmental institutional conditions may also affect labor market “niching.” For example, bank lending practices may influence immigrant and ethnic entrepreneurial undertakings, enhancing opportunities for some groups while limiting them for others. Also, the languages in which private sector training are offered affect how likely foreign-born are to secure requisite skills for particular work.

Rath (2002) refers to the role that both features of immigrant group life and broader structures have on labor market sorting as mixed embeddedness. Within a broader institutional context, immigrant group skills, plus their social and financial assets, that is, their human, social, and economic capital, influence the work they do. In that job-attainment in general and for immigrant groups, in particular, is heavily network driven (Massey *et al.*, 1998), once some foreign-born establish a beachhead in a line of work, other group members tend to gravitate to it as well. They do so because they rely on friends and family to secure work and they like jobs where they know others (Lieberson, 1980; Waldinger, 1994; Card and DiNardo, 2000; Light and Gold, 2000:21).⁵

Women have been found to be especially reliant on personal ties for job-attainment, with their networks tending to channel them to work where women cluster (Sassen, 1995:103). As a result, networks that result in inclusionary employment opportunities for one immigrant group, that may be gender-specific, prove exclusionary for others, an unintended consequence of in-group dynamics. Such inclusionary–exclusionary practices may occur anywhere in the labor market, in both high and low prestige jobs.

Network-based ethnic “niching” extends to the small business sector, and may involve persons self-employed. Immigrants have long been associated with small businesses and self-employment (Light, 1972; Borjas, 1986; Light and Sanchez, 1987; Waldinger, 1996: Chapter 8 [pp. 254–299]; Bates, 1998). This is particularly true of certain immigrant groups, such as Cubans, Koreans, and Chinese. Ivan Light, the first to analyze immigrant entrepreneurship systematically, pointed to how ethnic solidarity, now referred to as embeddedness, influences business involvement.⁶

⁵Although we are concerned with immigrant labor market niches, different native-born groups have also been associated with distinctive niches, sometimes with different niches over time. Waldinger, 1996

⁶On the embeddedness of ethnic entrepreneurship, *see also* Zhou, 2004.

Drawing on human capital acquired in their homeland, and sometimes on financial resources with which they emigrated, entrepreneurial foreign-born may also benefit from family-based social capital that they develop where they resettle. Family social capital may involve unpaid and trusted labor from relatives, and financial resources that kin pool (Portes and Zhou, 1992; Sanders and Nee, 1996).

Immigrant entrepreneurs, in turn, may draw on cheap co-ethnic labor, especially when co-ethnics have few labor market options owing to their lack of proficiency in the language of the new country, labor market discrimination, or other constraints. The entrepreneurs may concomitantly generate business for co-ethnics (who, in turn, may hire co-ethnics). Co-ethnic business biases can provide bedrock for so-called enclave economies (Wilson and Portes, 1980), involving communities with diverse mutually sustaining co-ethnic businesses. The businesses benefit from the formation of markets for their goods and services among "their own."

Immigrant proclivity toward self-employment does not imply business success (Kim, Hurh, and Fernandez, 1989; Yoon, 1991). Indeed, immigrant groups differ in their business success. For example, among new immigrant Asian groups in the 1980s, sales and receipts for firms without paid employees were lower for Vietnamese than for Indians, Chinese, and Korean (but higher than for Filipino), and Vietnamese, on average, had the smallest businesses, with the fewest paid employees (Bonacich, 1987:448). Among southeast Asian businesses Vietnamese had the highest failure rate (Espiritu, 1997:79), and their businesses were the least profitable (with Indian businesses the most profitable [Bates, 1993:28]). By the turn of the century Vietnamese businesses still garnered the lowest average annual receipts of Asian American owned businesses (Doan, 2004:33). The most successful immigrant businesses rarely cater exclusively to co-ethnics. Rather, they serve broader markets (as do, for example, Koreans drycleaners and grocers).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NAIL-CARE NICHE AND VIETNAMESE INVOLVEMENT IN IT: AN OVERVIEW

Studies that highlight Vietnamese concentration in low prestige, low paying jobs in declining sectors of the economy, as well as those that note their lack of business success, ignore Vietnamese involvement in nail-care work. Nail care is part of the beauty industry, a vibrant sector of the U.S.

economy. In the early 2000s beauty salons generated \$60 billion in sales, and employed more than 1.6 million people.⁷ Nail salons at the time accounted for approximately 10 percent of the revenue and 6 percent of employment in the sector (Nguyen, 2010: Figures 3.1 and 3.5; *NAILS Magazine, Big Book(s), 1997–2008*).

Manicure work is a relatively new occupation, officially recognized only since the 1980s. The U.S. Department of Labor first cited a nail-care category, “fingernail former,” as a job classification in the 1980s, and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics added “nail salons” to its business classifications for the first time in the latter 1990s.⁸ Although a new line of work, by the early 2000s it was one of the fastest growing (USDOL, 2009).

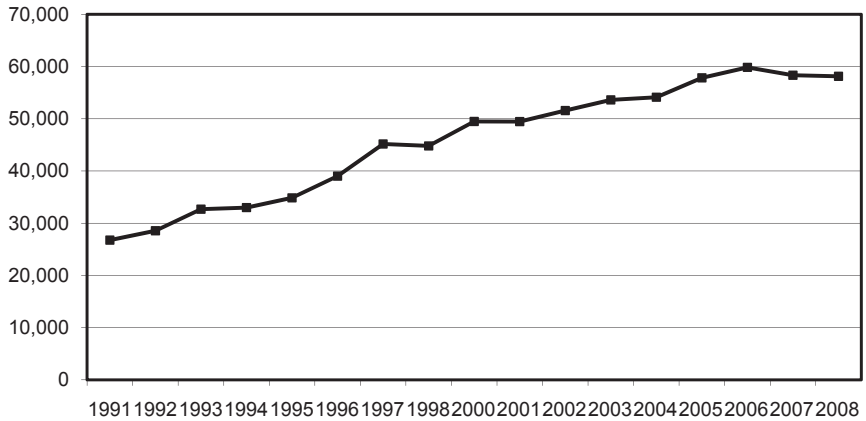
Professional nail care initially was a secondary service that hair salons catering to well-to-do clientele offered (*American Salon*, 2005:15). Self-standing nail salons only began to proliferate in the 1980s, with their number more than doubling between 1991 and 2008 (Figure I) (but declining slightly in number between 2005 and 2008). By 2008 they accounted for 29 percent of all beauty sector shops (*NAILS Magazine Big Book, 2007–2008*). Meanwhile, nail salon share of all beauty sector revenue increased, while hair salon revenue decreased (although hair salons continued to account for most revenue in the sector) (Figure II).

As nail salons proliferated, sales of nail products for home use, for self-manicures, diminished (Nguyen, 2010). Many women had liked to have polished nails, but they had not considered professional nail care an affordable option. Indicative that the decline in self-manicures was associated with a turn to professional nail care, the number of women who reported salon manicures rose from one in four in 1997 to one in three seven years later (*American Salon*, 2005:37).

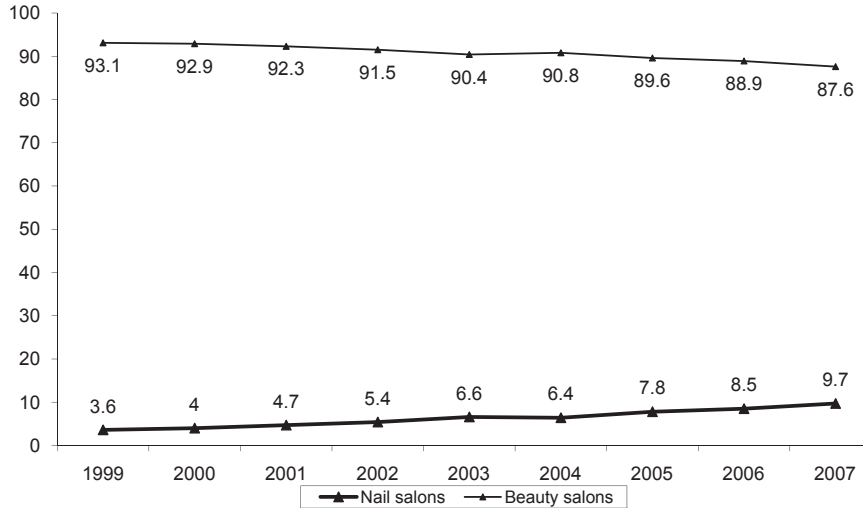
Vietnamese are closely associated with the growth of professional manicures. As of 2000, more Vietnamese were employed nationally in the U.S. census category “hairdresser and other grooming services” than in

⁷ *Salon City Reports on Professional Beauty Federation’s Capitol Hill Event* (<http://www.ewire.com/display.cfm/Wire_ID/5342>). By way of contrast, box office movie revenue totaled \$9.8 billion in 2008. See *US Movie Market Summary for 2008* (<<http://www.the-numbers.com/market/2008.php>>). Both on-line references were accessed in November 2009.

⁸ Based on Nguyen’s tracing of Department of Labor and Bureau of Labor Statistics publications, beginning in 1960.

Figure I. Number of Nail Salons in the U.S., 1991–2008

Source: Compiled from *NAILS Magazine*, 1997–2008.

Figure II. Nail and Beauty Salon Share of Total Revenue in the Beauty Sector, 1999–2007

Source: Adapted from the USDL, 1999–2007.

any other occupation. Thirteen percent of Vietnamese were so employed (Table 1). The next most common forms of Vietnamese employment, “clerical and administrative staff,” “assembly line workers,”

TABLE 1
TOP TEN COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN OF FOREIGN-BORN HAIRDRESSER AND GROOMING SERVICE WORKERS IN THE U.S. IN 2000

Country	Workers	As a % of all workers from that country	As a % of all foreign-born U.S. hairdresser/grooming workers	As a % of all U.S. hairdresser/grooming workers
1. Vietnam	66,700	12.7	34.1	9.2
2. Mexico	20,100	0.4	10.3	2.8
3. North & South Korea	10,000	2.4	5.1	1.4
4. Dominican Republic	10,000	3.0	5.1	1.4
5. China	5,300	1.0	2.7	0.7
6. Philippines	4,400	0.5	2.2	0.6
7. Germany	4,300	0.9	2.2	0.6
8. Cuba	3,600	0.9	1.8	0.5
9. Italy	3,300	2.2	1.7	0.5
10. Colombia	3,100	1.1	1.6	0.4
Total foreign-born	195,700	n/a	100.0	27.0
Total U.S. workers	724,815	n/a	n/a	100.0

Source: Adapted from Bloch, Carter, and Gebeloff, 2009.

and “industrial equipment operators,” each involved 8 percent of employed Vietnamese.

It is *immigrant* Vietnamese, in particular, who carved out the nail niche. Less than 1 percent of Vietnamese manicurists are U.S. born (Federman, Harrington, and Krynski, 2006:309; *NAILS Magazine* March 2007:84). Meanwhile, Vietnamese, far more than other immigrants, work in the beauty sector. In 2000, for example, only 2 percent of Korean and 3 percent of Dominican immigrants worked in beauty sector jobs, the immigrant groups with the second and third largest percent of persons so employed. Indeed, Vietnamese accounted for 34 percent of the foreign-born employed in the sector (Table 1).

However, Vietnamese work within the beauty sector is highly specialized, in manicuring. Since 2007 they outnumber all other ethnic and racial groups employed as professional manicurists (Table 2). In 2009 Whites, by far the demographically largest group in the U.S., accounted for 37 percent of manicurists, down from 50 percent 7 years earlier. During the same years Vietnamese, who comprised less than 1 percent of the U.S. population, rose to account for 40 percent of manicurists, up from 33 percent. (*NAILS Magazine*, 2007, 2008:36; USDC 2008). Vietnamese association with manicuring involved ethnic displacement, of Whites in particular, but also their centrality to the growth in professional nail-care employment.

TABLE 2
PERCENT OF NAIL TECHNICIANS IN THE U.S. OF DIVERSE ETHNICITIES, 1999–2009

Ethnic group	1999	2001	2002	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Vietnamese	*	*	33	37	39	38	41	43	40
Caucasian	n/a	n/a	50	46	43	41	39	36	37
Hispanics	n/a	n/a	7	8	7	7	7	8	10
African American	n/a	n/a	4	6	8	8	10	10	10
Korean	*	*	6	*	2	2	2	2	2
Asian/ Other	27	39		3	1	4	1	1	1
(Total)	(n/a)	(328,343)	(368,818)	(388,072)	(380,635)	(361,427)	(347,898)	(349,370)	(348,814)

(total number of nail technicians in each year in bottom row, in parentheses).

*: Grouped with Asian; n/a: Data not available.

Source: *NAILS Magazine, 1997–2009 Big Book(s)*, years 2001–2009, tabulations by Nguyen.

Manicurists include Vietnamese from diverse regions of Vietnam who arrived in different years, as immigrants as well as refugees.⁹ They also include Vietnamese of diverse ethnic backgrounds (including Chinese–Vietnamese).¹⁰ Thus, although the pioneer manicurists were refugees, as detailed below, once nail care became a job option, later arrivals, in greater numbers, became manicurists (*see* Table 3).¹¹ The recent arrivals who pursue nail work sustain and reproduce the ethnic base of the labor market niche that the first arrivals carved out.

The experience in California reveals how closely Vietnamese are associated with the growth in professional nail care. Federman, Harrington, and Krynski (2006) found that in 1987 ten times as many non-Vietnamese as Vietnamese were registered manicurists in the state. The number of non-Vietnamese manicurists increased until 1990. Thereafter their numbers decreased, while the number of Vietnamese increased, to the point that by 1998 more Vietnamese than non-Vietnamese were registered manicurists. Then, between 1998 and 2002 the total number of manicurists doubled, while the number of Vietnamese manicurists increased 10-fold.

⁹The number of Vietnamese-born in the U.S. rose from a mere 4,600 in 1960 to over a million shortly after the turn of the century (Cheng, 1994:41; Portes and Rumbaut, 2006:46; USDC, 2008). The largest number moved to the U.S. immediately after the Vietnam War ended in 1975, as refugees (Nguyen, 2010: Table 2.3).

¹⁰On Chinese–Vietnamese employment and entrepreneurship in southern California, *see* Gold, 1994.

¹¹On the social backgrounds of the different émigré waves, *see* Gold, 1992:57–61.

TABLE 3
VIETNAMESE MANICURISTS BY YEAR-OF-ARRIVAL (%), IN 2007

Before 1980	10.7%
1980–1984	10.9%
1985–1989	12.9%
1990–1994	35.1%
1995–1999	17.9%
2000 to present	12.5%
Total	100.0%

Source: *NAILS Magazine*, 2007, p.84.

Vietnamese involvement in, and growing domination of, manicuring seems not the result, per se, of their underpricing non-Vietnamese. Federman, Harrington, and Krynski (2006:310) found in their California study that Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese, on average, earned similar wages. They also, found that they worked, on average, similar hours per week.

Vietnamese domination of nail-care work also can not be demographically explained. While California is home to the largest concentration of Vietnamese, and it was in California, as detailed below, that Vietnamese initially became involved in professional nailcare, they have also come to be associated with professional nail-care work in states where few of them live.¹² They dominate nailwork in Texas, the state with the second largest number of Vietnamese (Liao, 2005; Quang, 2006; Tran, 2008), as well as states such as Massachusetts.

Massachusetts serves as a window through which to observe the role Vietnamese have assumed in the development of the labor market niche where their small numbers would suggest they would be minimally, if at all, involved. Vietnamese account for only 0.7 percent of the state's population, and the state is home to a mere 8 percent as many Vietnamese as California and to 25 percent as many as Texas (USDC, 2008; Nguyen, 2010: Table 2.5). In Massachusetts Vietnamese are employed, along with other immigrants, in groups, in manufacturing assembly work (Allen and Turner, 2007). However, as of 2007 25 percent of Vietnamese in the state's labor force worked in nail care, more than in any other line of work. The nail industry developed in the state only as Vietnamese began to settle there.

The nail industry in Massachusetts centers in Boston, where half of all Vietnamese in the state live. As nationally, in Massachusetts in general

¹²New York City (and nearby New Jersey) is the one area where Vietnamese are not the main ethnic group manicurists. Koreans are. And in New York Koreans have been upgrading their services to include massages, eyebrow and leg waxing, and to involve high-tech equipment. Lee, 2006; Oh, 2007; Kang, 2010.

and in Boston in particular Vietnamese cluster only in manicuring within the beauty sector. For example, about two-thirds of the over 200 Vietnamese employed in the beauty service industry in Boston in 2008 worked as manicurists. In contrast, only 14 percent of them worked as cosmetologists and aestheticians, in beauty sector jobs that, overall, employ more people (Nguyen, 2010: Table 2.10). Cosmetologists and aestheticians are licensed to provide manicure services, but also hair and skin care. Vietnamese cluster in the segment of the beauty industry that requires the least formal training. Over the years few of them have expanded their credentials to diversify the beauty work for which they are qualified, to pursue the more lucrative activity in the sector.

Meanwhile, in Massachusetts, as nationally, Vietnamese dominate the nail niche as owners as well as employees. Most nail salons in the state are Vietnamese operated (Dickerson, 1997; Murray, 1997; Nguyen, 2010). But Vietnamese almost exclusively own nail businesses, not beauty salons. In some cities in the Greater Boston Metropolitan Area Vietnamese own the only manicure shops (Nguyen, 2010: Table 2.12–2.14). Even in cities such as Lowell, where Cambodians account for 57 percent of the Asian population and Vietnamese for only 9 percent, Vietnamese owned half the nail salons, more than Cambodians owned.

Vietnamese association with nail work is highly gendered, although somewhat less so than among non-Vietnamese manicurists. As of the early 2000s, nationally men accounted for only 4 percent of nail technicians (*NAILS Magazine*, 2007:78). Among Vietnamese, men accounted for 28 percent. However, with one in five working age Vietnamese women employed as manicurists (*NAILS Magazine*, 2007:78; USDC, 2008, Nguyen, 2010:160),¹³ they are the primary force behind the growth of the nail niche.¹⁴

In sum, immigrant Vietnamese women were not the first to provide professional manicures, but they have been intricately associated with the expansion of professional nail care and its transformation into a specialized service within the beauty sector. Aggregate data on beauty sector employment conceal how Vietnamese developed the nail niche.

¹³Willett (2005:68) attributes the higher percent of men among Vietnamese manicurists to the discrimination they receive in other sectors of the labor market.

¹⁴Despite the patriarchal nature of the Vietnamese family, Vietnamese culture contains a strong tradition of female autonomy, independence, and entrepreneurship (Gold, 1992:55; Kibria 1993).

ORIGINS OF VIETNAMESE INVOLVEMENT IN MANICURING

How to explain Vietnamese gravitation to manicuring, given that the line of work was unknown to the first post Vietnam War arrivals before emigrating, and that the limited demand for professional nail care in the U.S. had been addressed by non-Vietnamese? And why did Vietnamese, not other new immigrants who needed work, come to dominate nail work? While discrimination, language barriers, and, for some, limited education constricted Vietnamese job options, how, for all intents and purposes, did they come to dominate the employment niche?

The initial Vietnamese involvement in manicuring is almost apocryphal. It reveals the role leadership may play, including by native-born. The actress Tippi Hedren (who starred in Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds"), concerned with the plight of Vietnamese refugees housed in a tent city in California, sought to help the women "make it" in America (Hammond, 2004). Allegedly impressed with the women's hand dexterity, in 1975 she brought her manicurist to teach them manicuring skills. She also persuaded a beauty school both to train the refugees, free of charge, and to help them find work.

One Vietnamese woman creatively built on her newly acquired manicure skills by opening the first Vietnamese-American owned beauty salon, together with her husband (who had been a navy commander in South Vietnam before seeking refuge in the U.S. after the Vietnam War ended). They went on to open a beauty training school, the Advance Beauty College (ABC), in what became known as Little Saigon, the Vietnamese enclave in Orange County, California and emergent hub of the Vietnamese community in the U.S. (Tran, 2008).¹⁵ The school offered training in a range of specialized beauty services, not limited to, but including, manicuring. Most important, ABC offered classes in Vietnamese, so that English proficiency was not a barrier to entry. The immigrant enclave, in turn, provided these entrepreneurial Vietnamese with a social and economic base for their school. And they hired employees their school trained, all the while that their salon and training school served as models for other Vietnamese.

Faced with limited job options, Vietnamese women responded to these early initiatives. The training period was short, and they could

¹⁵As of 2000 Orange County and San Jose, both in California, accounted for one-fifth of Vietnamese in the U.S. (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006:42).

acquire the training in their native language. Moreover, both the Vietnamese entrepreneurs who founded beauty schools, and Vietnamese students who attended, qualified, as refugees, for government assistance (Gold, 1992:159). The costs for their training and business undertakings, accordingly, were minimal.

Building on the job training and work opportunities, Vietnamese in southern California developed a cluster of businesses that provided bedrock for the ethnic niche. Southern California became home to a growing number of Vietnamese-owned beauty schools besides ABC that trained and helped certify Vietnamese for manicure work. Also, manufacturers and distributors of nail products established businesses in southern California (Huynh, 1996). Most important, the number of Vietnamese-owned nail shops that hired co-ethnics proliferated.

Under the circumstances, the number of Vietnamese who trained as nail technicians and who opened nail salons in southern California surged. Many of the first Vietnamese manicurists initially held other jobs. They switched work, no doubt, because they considered manicuring preferable once learning of the possibility. However, by the late 1990s Vietnamese who entered the labor market for the first time tended to go directly into nail work (Doan, 2004:53). They considered manicuring an employment of choice, given their perceived labor market options.

CONDITIONS CONTRIBUTING TO VIETNAMESE BUILD-UP AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE NAIL-CARE NICHE

Economists presume that “invisible” market forces create demand for goods and services in response to a supply of cadre who provide them, and the converse, that demand induces people to address it. However, before Vietnamese became manicurists both the supply and demand for professional nail care was limited and addressed by non-Vietnamese. Rather, Vietnamese involvement in nail care has rested on their *creating* broad-based demand for professional manicures, linked to their ability and readiness to obtain the work requisites, and, most importantly, their development of a business model that generated employment opportunities for them, through their ethnic networks, both as owners and employees. They were able to fulfill regulatory requirements that might have stood in the way, owing to institutional changes that they helped bring about. Accordingly, Vietnamese development of, and association with, the nail niche is sociologically explicable, in ways elaborated below.

Vietnamese Broadening of Demand for Nail Care: Niche Stretching

More than responding to otherwise unsatisfied demand for professional nail care, Vietnamese fueled demand for it. They did so by “niche stretching,” namely by broadening the customer base for professional nail care and “deepening,” diversifying, the range of nail-care offerings.

Until the early 1980s professional manicures had been a luxury service only wealthy women could afford. Upscale beauty salons, as noted, offered nail care as a secondary service to address their patrons’ desire for manicures with “one stop shopping.” Under the circumstances, demand for professional manicure was minimal and class specific, and addressed by non-Vietnamese.

Several changes reduced manicure operating costs which could be passed on to consumers in lower fees for services. The lower charges made manicures affordable for the first time to women across socioeconomic classes. Vietnamese were intricately involved with some, though not all, of the changes. The first changes were technological. They allowed for greater work efficiency. Vietnamese played no role in the technological innovations, but they were quick to take advantage of them, and they popularized their usage. The most important technological change, in 1979, involved the development of an acrylic product for nails that offered multiple advantages over plastic nail tips, until then used in manicures (Kang, 2010:39). The new product strengthened nails, made them more flexible, and permitted application of longer tips. Also, the acrylic tips were cheaper than plastic tips.

Another technological innovation involved development of electric-powered nail files. An electric file allowed nail-shaping in half the time manual filing required. Vietnamese were quick to adopt this innovation as well, which further reduced their operating costs (Gale Group, 1997). Vietnamese also introduced use of wider and flatter brushes that allowed for faster application of polish.

Most important, Vietnamese were intricately associated with what might be called the “McNailing of America,” a business innovation that transformed professional nail care into a mass service. The business innovation involved the establishment of stand-alone nail salons in the neighborhoods where people lived and worked that offered quick, assembly-line service on a walk-in “no appointment necessary” basis, at half the price upscale beauty salons charged (Dang, 1999). In making manicures both affordable and easy-to-attain, Vietnamese created conditions that led women of diverse class, ethnic, and racial backgrounds to come to

consider professional manicures *de rigueur*, important to their presentation of self – with nail “tastes” varying somewhat among the customer bases (e.g. coveted length of nails and nail polish design) (see Kang, 2006).¹⁶ Meanwhile, with nails needing ongoing care, demand for professional manicures became routinized among the broadened customer base.

Vietnamese nails-only shops revolutionized manicuring in much the same manner that McDonalds revolutionized inexpensive, fast food service. Like McDonalds, the nails-only shops appealed to busy Americans who wanted quick, dependable service, when convenient to their schedules, and who were content with the provisioning of the service in an impersonal manner.

Vietnamese were also intricately associated with an expansion of offerings that further fueled demand for professional nail care. In the latter 1990s they added inexpensive spa-style pedicures to their service menu (as opposed to regular pedicures, which they offered from the onset). While in performing pedicures they *defied* their homeland-acquired cultural disdain for handling people’s feet (Nguyen, 2010:167), they did not allow their personal values to stand in the way of economic opportunity. However, another technological innovation both stimulated new customer demand for pedicures, and helped Vietnamese overcome their cultural aversion to handling feet: the development of whirlpool pedicure spa chairs, known as pedicure thrones. The thrones enhanced clients’ pedicure experience, and eased the work for nail technicians.

Reflecting the growing popularity of pedicures, the *American Salon’s Green Book* (2005:37) reported both that the percent of women having salon pedicures more than doubled between 1997 and 2004, from 11 to 24, and that women had pedicures with growing frequency. Indicative of Vietnamese close association with the growing popularity of pedicures, a California-based manufacturer of pedicure thrones estimated, in 2006, that more than half of the company’s sales went to Vietnamese-owned nail salons (Rust, 2006). Women increasingly came to view pedicures, more expensive than hand manicures, also important to their dress code, especially in warm months when they wore sandals and open-toe shoes. As growing numbers of Americans viewed pedicures as essential, demand for nail care further increased.

¹⁶For a discussion of how nail technicians have developed different customer relations in salons catering to different racial and class clientele, to cater to different conditions of customer satisfaction, see Kang, 2010.

Vietnamese further expanded demand for professional nail care by diversifying their manicure services to include nail art. Skilled manicurists perform fingernail artwork, involving intricate designs and such ornaments as beads and charms. Some manicurists even paint facsimiles of paintings by famous artists, such as by Van Gogh and Picasso (*NAILS Magazine* June 2007:74–48). The nail art is especially popular among African Americans (Kang, 2006:11), a group upscale salons had not tapped.

Meanwhile, new nail enamels have become available that glow in the dark, that are fragrant, and that, reportedly, respond to body heat and mood. Vietnamese manicurists have come to offer these nail options as well.

Some non-Vietnamese owners of upscale beauty salons that offered manicures as a secondary service fought the transformation of nail care into a less expensive, mass venture. They insinuated that the discount salons were unsanitary and unhealthy (Gale Group, 1997). Negative stereotyping of Asians fueled the controversy (Kang, 2010: Chapter Six). Their domination of the beauty industry notwithstanding, they failed in their campaign. They failed because growing numbers of Americans voted, in essence, with their hands and feet. When affordably priced and convenient to attain, they coveted professional nail care, and on an ongoing basis. As a result, upscale beauty salons that offered nail care found themselves at the sidelines of the “McNails” manicure revolution. Mounting consumer demand enabled Vietnamese, through their force of numbers, to win, quietly, the inter-ethnic battle with multiservice high-end salons in the beauty service industry.

In sum, Vietnamese created new demand for professional nail care among diverse socioeconomic and racial groups. They did so by lowering the cost of manicures, by diversifying their offerings, and by bringing their services to locations where potential clientele lived and worked. They broadened the market for professional nail care by developing a new business model which, although small in scale, transformed nail care into an inexpensive mass product. In that the services for which they expanded demand were not distinctively Vietnamese, how did they come to dominate the newly created professional nail-care niche?

Supply-Side Developments: Growth in the Pool of Vietnamese Workers and Entrepreneurs with the Requisites and Proclivity to Pursue Nail Niche Work

Vietnamese association with the nail niche rested concomitantly on supply-side developments, with the supply and demand forces separable

analytically more than empirically. Not only did demand for nail care grow as the number of Vietnamese offering affordable, quick, convenient, and diverse nail services increased, but the number of trained nail technicians expanded in response to growing demand for commercial nail care. As in the case of demand, “invisible market forces” do not account for the growth in number of Vietnamese nail-care providers. Institutional conditions, and social dynamics within the Vietnamese community, came to predispose Vietnamese immigrant women to work as manicurists, in ways that gave them an advantage over non-Vietnamese who might consider nailwork preferable to their alternative labor market options. No Latin American immigrant group, for example, pursued manicuring to nearly the same extent.

Institutional Factors

The government, at the federal and state levels, regulates professional nail care. It requires licensing to do the work. States administer the licensing exams, and establish their own standards as to the number of hours of training required and the language in which the exam may be taken. Government regulations also impact on labor and work conditions.

Government regulations contribute to Vietnamese concentration in manicuring, the beauty sector with the most minimal qualifying requirements. Requisite hours of training vary by state (from zero in Connecticut to 750 in Alabama). The greater the number of hours, the greater the barrier to entry.¹⁷ Whatever the number of hours, though, manicuring invariably requires fewer hours of training than other beauty sector work. Hairstylists, for example, often need more than three times as many hours of training as manicurists.¹⁸

Once an initial cluster of Vietnamese gravitated to manicuring, non-governmental institutions, as well as government regulations, evolved that induced other Vietnamese to follow suit. Although professional manicurists must be licensed, states do not necessarily require that the formal

¹⁷In some states, non-Vietnamese have pressed for an upgrading of requirements to limit ethnic competition (Kang, 2010:233).

¹⁸Alabama Board of Cosmetology. FAQs. Retrieved online July 2010 at <<http://www.aboc.state.al.us/FAQs.htm>>; Connecticut Department of Public Health. Nail Technician and Esthetician Information. Retrieved online July 2010 at <<http://www.ct.gov/dph/cwp/view.asp?a = 3121&q = 389378>>

training be in English. In allowing training in Vietnamese, Vietnamese with limited command of English can become manicurists. Indeed, most nail technicians are not proficient in English (Doan, 2004:42). Vietnamese have benefited from the opening of private vocational schools that offer training in Vietnamese. This occurred initially in California, where Vietnamese first became involved in nail care. However, schools offering training in Vietnamese subsequently opened in other states as well, as they saw a business opportunity. A survey in Massachusetts showed that even in a state where few Vietnamese live, Vietnamese mainly attended schools offering training in their native language (Doan, 2004:56).

Some state governments further facilitated Vietnamese entry into the profession by offering their licensing exam in Vietnamese, or by allowing exam-takers to use Vietnamese translators. When California, in 1996, introduced a Vietnamese language version of the licensing exam the number of registered Vietnamese manicurists rose markedly (Federman, Harrington, and Krynski, 2006:303). The California experience illustrates both how state regulations shape barriers to entry to particular labor market work, and how governments may intervene to make a line of work accessible to immigrants for whom their limited command of English would otherwise exclude them. Not all states, however, offer the exam in Vietnamese. Massachusetts, for example, has not had a consistent language policy. In some years it has offered the exam in Vietnamese, in other years not.

The favorable institutional conditions, above all in California with the largest concentration of Vietnamese, help explain why Vietnamese pursued work as manicurists. But they do not explain why Vietnamese, far more than other immigrant groups, gravitated to manicuring. Vietnamese domination over Hispanics is especially noteworthy. Many more Hispanics than Vietnamese live in southern California, where the Vietnamese nail niche first took hold, and in California, as well as in other states, training schools offer courses in Spanish and governments offer the licensing exam in Spanish, as well as in Vietnamese. Accordingly, the institutional conditions may be necessary, but they are not sufficient to account for Vietnamese development and growing domination of the nail niche.

Vietnamese Development of Nail Niche Social Capital

Vietnamese domination over Hispanics is partly explicable at the entrepreneurial level, in ways that have contributed to a Vietnamese employment bias. Vietnamese are near-unique among immigrants in owning manicure

salons (except in the New York metropolitan area, as noted, where Koreans own more salons), with their employment practices socially and culturally embedded in the Vietnamese community of which they form part. Because they typically employ co-ethnics, they provide work opportunities for Vietnamese, but not for Hispanics and other ethnic groups. In turn, owners' co-ethnic employment bias induces Vietnamese speakers who are not proficient in English to pursue careers as nail technicians, while not inducing other foreign-born to pursue such work. The salon owners can communicate with the non-English speaking immigrants from their shared homeland.

But why do entrepreneurial Vietnamese specifically open nail salons? They do so partly because business entry barriers are low. They can fairly easily accumulate the requisite capital. If they work hard and save, they may be able to afford a salon after a few years. Moreover, in that many salons are family businesses, entrepreneurial Vietnamese can draw on requisite start-up capital that they pool from relatives (from distant as well as immediate kin) (Doan, 2004:53; Nguyen, 2010:159).¹⁹ Since family members rarely charge interest, unlike banks, entrepreneurial Vietnamese can accordingly minimize their capital costs.²⁰

Furthermore, because salons vary in worth, depending on size and location, entrepreneurial Vietnamese have a range of business acquisition options available to them. Consequently, there are opportunities for Vietnamese with different capital resources. Indicative of the variable cost of salon acquisitions, in 2008 the owner of a small manicuring shop in an up-scale Boston suburb who wished to sell his business advertised it in a Vietnamese magazine for \$15,000. In contrast, the listed selling price in the same magazine for another, larger salon in a different suburb was \$85,000 (Thăng Long, 2008:81-82).

Family business ventures offer other advantages. To the extent that the salon owners rely on family members to help out, they also minimize their labor costs. And they can benefit from trust among kin, especially important in a business that often involves cash transactions.²¹

¹⁹Vietnamese here draw on their high valuation of family. *See* Gold, 1992:55.

²⁰Vietnamese in general tend to limit themselves to businesses that they can undertake with their own and family resources. For example, an Orange Country study of Vietnamese businesses found that nearly two-thirds of owners relied either on their own or family savings. Gold, 1992:100.

²¹On Vietnamese valuation of family, and trust in family, *see* Hitchcock and Wesner, 2009.

Low operating and acquisition costs, of course, should make ownership attractive to non-Vietnamese as well. Why, then, do mainly only Vietnamese become nail salon owners? Vietnamese, for one, have a comparative advantage in knowing the trade by the time they go into business for themselves. Typically, at the point of opening a salon they are experienced nail technicians. Since Vietnamese are more likely than other ethnic groups to work as nail technicians, they are better positioned to get the training in the trade on which the nail salon business rests. In general, employment in co-ethnic businesses tends to be associated with subsequent self-employment (Nee and Sanders, 2001:397).

Vietnamese salon owners, as well as Vietnamese rank-and-file, have informal as well as formal social networks to tap into that induce them to gravitate to nail-care work, and that have the unintended effect of excluding non-Vietnamese while, possibly, driving down Vietnamese earnings owing to the ethnic competition their numbers set in motion (as long as the manicurists stay within a given consumer market). Ever since Vietnamese established themselves in the nail sector, salon owners have known fellow Vietnamese they can hire as employees and who can help them find employees. Many Vietnamese get their jobs through friends and family (Doan, 2004:44-45; Nguyen, 2010). Moreover, Vietnamese salon owners can easily recruit workers through the Vietnamese training schools.

The Vietnamese media, in addition, provide both Vietnamese entrepreneurs and technicians in search of jobs access to work-relevant information unavailable to non-Vietnamese speakers. The de facto discriminatory practices associated with exclusion from the information circuit contribute to Vietnamese domination of the nail-care niche, both as owners and employees.²² According to a 2007 survey of Vietnamese salons, 70 percent of Vietnamese nail technicians prefer to read in Vietnamese (*NAILS Magazine*, 2007:76). Vietnamese manicurists in search of work, as well as salons to purchase, know to consult Vietnamese newspapers and magazines. Approximately half of the 118 nail industry related advertisements listed in the November 4, 2008 issue of the Vietnamese Boston magazine *Thăng Long*, for example, noted employee job openings in nail salons, and slightly more than one-third specified salons for sale. A Vietnamese newspaper in Falls Church, Virginia showed a roughly similar advertising breakdown (*Thương mại miền Đông* magazine, issue 806, September 5,

²²On ethnic-based closure as an unintended consequence of ethno-linguistic dependence among other Asian immigrant groups, see Sanders, Nee, and Sernau, 2002.

2008). In addition, Vietnamese salon owners have access to 24-hour-a-day Vietnamese cable television channels in certain cities that carry advertisements for nail-care supplies and salon services (Nguyen, 2010:175).

Vietnamese neighborhoods, however, can not offer sufficient business and employment opportunities for qualified Vietnamese manicurists. Vietnamese have developed and expanded their nail niche involvement by targeting other neighborhoods, what Ram and Hillin (1994) call “breaking out.” So extensive has their geographic dispersal been that Vietnamese have coined a phrase, *làm nail xuyên bang*, which, translated literally, means “doing nails across states.” Indicative of their growing geographic spread, between 2000 and 2007 the number of nail technicians per thousand people declined in California while increasing in other states. Also indicative, in 2007 about 15 percent of Vietnamese manicurists in Massachusetts had been trained in some other state (Nguyen, 2010:172). As Vietnamese have dispersed across the U.S., entrepreneurial Vietnamese have come to have co-ethnic labor to draw on nationwide and new locations where they could develop customer markets.

While most salons are “mom and pop” (and mainly mom!) undertakings, the most entrepreneurial Vietnamese have opened multiple stores, including nail-chain franchises. Some of the franchises operate in multiple states. The largest nail chain is Regal Nails, located inside Walmarts. Started by Quy Charlie Ton in 1997, 10 years later his company operated 925 salons that employed 3,700 nail technicians (Roy, 2007:110). Because Quy Ton was biased toward hiring co-ethnics, Vietnamese immigrants own more than 99 percent of his franchises (Doan, 2004:60; Miller, 2007). Accordingly, although Regal Nails, in its affiliation with Walmarts, is associated with a business model that has eroded immigrant and other small business opportunities, Quy Ton has incorporated Vietnamese into the transformation of nail care provisioning that he has overseen. While transforming conditions of ownership, the franchises retain small business practices. Consequently, his chain is likely to have far less effect on employment than the WalMarts in which his salons are situated. Ownership concentration differs in its impact in the retail service versus goods sector.

More likely to impact on Vietnamese involvement in the nail niche in the years to come is the immigration of new Vietnamese women. In that almost without exception only foreign-born Vietnamese work as manicurists, there is a generational life cycle to the labor market niche.

Children of Vietnamese immigrants, as they get educated and fluent in English, gravitate to other jobs they consider preferable. Under the circumstances, the continuation of Vietnamese domination of the nail niche hinges on the arrival of new Vietnamese who take advantage of the institutional arrangements and social networks that earlier Vietnamese women immigrants put in place. Thus far, the immigrant stream, as detailed in Table 3, continues to fuel the labor market niche. However, should economic opportunities improve substantially in Vietnam, with the deepening of government-initiated economic reforms there, or should the U.S. government reduce the number of Vietnamese to whom it grants immigration rights, the ethnic group's association with nail care would likely diminish.

With U.S.-born Vietnamese gravitating to other types of work, once they acquire more human and cultural capital than their immigrant parents, and possibly access also to more financial capital, immigrant Vietnamese social capital proves limited. Immigrant networks provide access to a narrow range of work, and they, in effect, fuel intra-ethnic competition. Consequently, upon acquiring other forms of capital Vietnamese ethnic ties diminish as a source of capital. Vietnamese ties function most as a source of capital when they lack English-speaking cultural capital and the human capital required for better labor market jobs. In essence, Vietnamese social capital contains seeds of its own inter-generational demise.²³

THE DEEPENING OF VIETNAMESE VESTED ECONOMIC INTERESTS IN THE NAIL NICHE

For the time being, though, Vietnamese diversification of business involvements in the nail economy contributes further to their association with the labor market niche. The businesses amplify the economic base of the nail niche and deepen Vietnamese economic interests in it. Some of the diversification has enhanced the competitive edge of Vietnamese in the niche.

²³The objective quality of nail-care work conditions (*e.g.* earnings, job security, health conditions), and Vietnamese perceptions of them, are beyond the scope of this article. The fact that second generation immigrants do not pursue manicuring, even though they could easily access the networks to make it possible, suggests Vietnamese valuation of manicuring changes with their job options.

For one, entrepreneurial Vietnamese have developed “backward linkages” in the nail sector. They have established companies that manufacture polish and acrylic systems, plus other products, Vietnamese salon owners buy (Doan, 2004:57). One such company is Odyssey Nail Systems, founded in 2000 by Trang Nguyen, an internationally acclaimed, award-winning, nail specialist. His company manufactures a full range of nail-care products (Bui, 2007).

Misa Cosmetics is another Vietnamese-American owned company that produces nail-care supplies. Brian Tran, the owner, together with family members, had owned a motorcycle-seat manufacturing company in Vietnam. After emigrating to the U.S. in the early 1980s he found work in a Vietnamese nail salon. Building on his business experience in Vietnam, and familiarity with the nail sector he acquired in the U.S., he founded, in the 1990s, Misa Cosmetics (Rust, 2006). Tran exemplifies how immigrants can leverage home country education and work experience to capitalize on opportunities where they move, in this case to capitalize on opportunities his fellow Vietnamese created in manicuring. But he did not come to the U.S. with specific nail-care experience.

Quy Charlie Ton, who franchises Regal Nails salons in Walmarts, developed, in turn, “forward” linkages in the nail sector (Doan, 2004; Miller, 2007; Roy, 2007). His initial involvement in the nail niche was as a manufacturer and supplier. His companies, Alfalfa Nail Supply and T4 Spa, manufacture nearly everything nail salons use, from emery boards to pedicure thrones. He innovatively built his mass network of manicure shops in Walmarts to create a secure market for his manicure supply businesses. Until then he had experienced difficulty finding markets for his products.

Co-ethnic solidarity has helped create and sustain market opportunities for such Vietnamese manufacturers and distributors.²⁴ However, the Vietnamese-owned manicure-related manufacture businesses remain too small to explain the vibrancy of the ethnic niche. Previously described ethnic dynamics are more consequential. Such non-Vietnamese owned companies as OPI and CND, for example, are key suppliers of nail polish for salons.

²⁴In California co-ethnic solidarity has even come to involve “purchasing groups” that buy nail products in bulk at discount. In lowering their supply costs, Vietnamese members of purchasing groups created an economic advantage for themselves. Non-Vietnamese salon owners typically buy for themselves or for a few friends (Hammond, 2004).

Transnationalization of the Vietnamese Nail Niche

Although the Vietnamese nail niche is a U.S.-based invention, it is transnationalizing, and in two distinct ways. Vietnamese in the U.S. have inspired the development of similar nail-care niches in other countries, and the U.S. nail niche supply chain has shifted partly to Vietnam.²⁵

Vietnamese-Americans have exported their expertise to other countries, and Vietnamese immigrants in other countries have developed nail niches inspired by the U.S. Vietnamese example. This is true, for example, in England (Bagwell, 2006, 2008) and in Czechoslovakia (Gissübelová, 2007). The British example is telling.²⁶ By 2003 nail shops, known as nail bars, accounted for nearly half of all Vietnamese businesses in Greater London. The first nail bar opened in 1997, but most opened only after the turn of the century. The initial Vietnamese shop owners either learned the manicure trade from U.S. family in the business or operated manicure businesses in the U.S. before spotting the market opportunity in England. And they tended to make occasional trips to the U.S. to keep up with nail-care developments there. In this manner Vietnamese are beginning a trend of doing nails “across nations,” in addition to doing nails “across states.”

One entrepreneurial Vietnamese who had worked for suppliers in the U.S. before setting up his own business in Seattle, later moved to London. He contributed to the proliferation of Vietnamese nail bars in London by marketing “start-up kits” and advising on licensing requirements. He claimed to have hundreds of Vietnamese clients who found him through word of mouth.

After the formation of the London niche, transnational networks became less important there. Vietnamese who subsequently became manicurists learned the trade in England, including from friends and family. However, incipient economically useful “reverse transnationalism” seems also to be at play in London, among British-born Vietnamese. Some second-generation Vietnamese women go to the U.S., especially to California’s “Little Saigon,” to learn what they perceive to be superior nail

²⁵This mode of transnationalization differs from modes noted among other immigrant entrepreneurs. Other bases of transnational entrepreneurship include ownership of export and import businesses and businesses where ownership or investment is based in one country while production is located in another. Zhou, 2004:1054–60.

²⁶The discussion of England draws on Bagwell, 2008.

techniques practiced there. Bilingual as well, upon returning they offer assets to the nail bars run by the Vietnam-born (Barber, 2011).²⁷ Meanwhile, as the London market has become saturated, enterprising Vietnamese have spanned out to other place in England, in search of less competitive markets. Thus, in England, as in the U.S., Vietnamese created new markets for their services by dispersing geographically.

The entrepreneurial Vietnamese man who developed “start-up” kits proceeded to expand his market even beyond England. In this vein, he recruited Vietnamese in Paris, including relatives, to come to London to learn nail-care work. Although the Vietnamese community in France is older and more established than in England, Vietnamese manicuring, based on the U.S. model of stand-alone nail shops offering quick, inexpensive manicures, apparently only developed in France after transnational networks, ultimately traceable to the U.S. Vietnamese nail niche, took hold.

In turn, Vietnamese-Americans have “Vietnamized” the niche they developed in the U.S., in part by returning to their homeland and opening U.S.-style nail salons and offering manicure services on a scale previously unknown there.²⁸ The names of many of the shops include the word “Nail,” reflecting their diaspora origin (Lê, 2005). Changes in Communist Vietnamese government policies created the conditions that made this possible, in allowing home visits and return migration, and reforming the economy to allow private entrepreneurship.

As in the U.S. and England, in Vietnam professional manicuring has increasingly become available nationwide. The first Vietnamese salons opened in Saigon (officially known as Ho Chi Minh City), from where the core of the Vietnamese diaspora originated. More recently, though, salons have opened elsewhere in the country, especially in Hanoi (Nguyen, 2010:200).

In Vietnam, however, the nail niche is evolving in a more class segmented manner, owing to the greater poverty in the country and associated disparities both in consumer purchasing power and possible capital

²⁷As in the U.S., nail shops tend to be family businesses that rely heavily on trust and personal networks, including for advice, financing, and supplies (Bagwell, 2006).

²⁸The discussion of the Vietnamization of the Vietnamese-American nail niche draws entirely on open-ended interviews with a select number of Vietnamese in Vietnam conducted in conjunction with Thanhngi Nguyen’s doctoral dissertation. See Nguyen, 2010: Chapter Six. A more detailed analysis of the Vietnamization of the U.S. nail niche awaits future research.

accumulation for business investment. Unlike in the U.S., where stand-alone manicures draw clientele from diverse social classes (except the well-to-do, who continue to patronize high-end beauty salons that offer manicures as a secondary service), manicurists in Vietnam, with different economic assets to invest in their businesses, appeal to customers of distinct socioeconomic classes. The stand-alone salons with the best facilities attract relatively well-off clientele. Poorer manicurists, who cannot afford the cost of a salon and who can only afford inferior equipment, work as mobile manicurists. They peddle their services in the neighborhoods where less well-off customers live and work (Nguyen, 2010:203–06).

Vietnam has also become a “backward link” of the nail niche in the U.S., and, more recently, in other countries, such as England. This is true both in the labor and materials supply chains. Some Vietnamese who seek to work abroad as manicurists now acquire their training in their home country, where the cost of training is much less. And if trained in Vietnam, they can begin work almost immediately after emigrating. They often can count on family to hire them, even if they lack legal work permits and have not passed their licensing exam (Tran, 2008:1). In exchange for employment the just-arrived immigrants offer cheap, loyal labor, which keeps salon owners’ costs down and, in principle, their profit margin up. Accordingly, the nail niche has become transnationally embedded as well as transnationally sustained.

Vietnam, in addition, has become a source of nail industry supplies for overseas salons. Some Vietnamese-Americans take advantage of homeland trips to purchase supplies for their U.S. salons, at a fraction of the price U.S. suppliers charge. They purchase, for example, nail files, clippers, and even salon chairs.

The transnationalization of the nail niche remains in an incipient stage. However, for the foreseeable future, it is likely to continue to expand “horizontally,” through the formation of homologous salons around the world, modeled after those in the U.S., and “vertically, backwards,” through the development of material and, especially, labor supply chains in Vietnam. The Vietnamization of the supply chain reduces the operating costs of businesses in the U.S. and other wealthy countries, which helps keep the price of Vietnamese nail care offerings low. In turn, Vietnamese-born, in targeting overseas manicure employment opportunities through their diaspora ties, to date provide labor that helps sustain the mainly first generation immigrant-based niche. This is most true of women.

CONCLUSION

In sum, Vietnamese created an ethnic labor market niche in manicuring. While they were not the first to offer nail-care services, they transformed and expanded the sector and became the main group of providers. They created a broad-based market for professional nail care independent of demand for other beauty services, and addressed the demand.

They generated multiclass, multiracial demand for a service that non-Vietnamese had previously provided only for the well-to-do. Vietnamese did so by introducing affordable, quick, and easily attainable nail care, and diversifying their offerings. While “stretching” and “deepening” the niche, they created a broadened social base for nail care, transformed nail care norms, and routinized demand for their services.

Concomitantly, growing numbers of Vietnamese immigrants acquired the training to do professional nail care. They could do so because the barriers to entry became surmountable to them, as their force of numbers contributed to the creation of institutional conditions facilitating their acquisition of necessary credentials, and because they developed a business model that transformed professional nail care into what can be called “McNails.” In turn, ethnic-based networks enabled them to monopolize, increasingly, employment opportunities in the niche, both as entrepreneurs and rank-and-file employees.

The niche Vietnamese created constitutes a vibrant and increasingly important segment of the beauty industry, linked to the expanding service economy in the U.S. However, they work in the least skilled, least revenue-generating segment of the beauty industry. Most typically, when Vietnamese entrepreneurs expand their business involvements they do so by opening additional salons of the same sort, not by diversifying their beauty care offerings to include those that are most profitable. Similarly, nail technicians do not invest in additional training to qualify for the better paying jobs in the beauty industry. Vietnamese, accordingly, are creating conditions that work against their own longer-term interests. They are fueling intra-ethnic competition that is likely to drive down their earnings, unless they further increase demand for their services. For the immediate future, niche expansion rests on transnational developments. That expansion includes “Vietnamizing” the niche resource supply chain, in a manner that contains costs while sustaining the U.S.-based niche.

The Vietnamese experience in manicuring suggests the following propositions about immigrant labor market niche creation, growth, maintenance, and transnationalization:

1. *Niche creation*: An immigrant group may carve out a sector of the labor market for themselves, as owners as well as employees, even when their command of the host country language and their formal education is limited, and even when they lack political and economic power. They can do so if they are innovative and quick to capitalize on relevant innovations by others, and if they create demand for their labor. Involvement in a niche may be mainly gender-specific. It is network-driven, and contingent on favorable institutional conditions that an immigrant group may help create.
2. *Niche expansion*: An immigrant group may expand the base of its niche, through “niche stretching.” It can do so by broadening the territorial, class, racial, and ethnic markets for its labor, as well as by diversifying its offerings, even within a narrow range.
3. *Niche maintenance*: An immigrant group may sustain a niche that offers less-than-ideal earnings and work conditions if ongoing homeland immigration provides labor to sustain the economic activity. New arrivals will gravitate to the niche when they consider the line of work attractive, relative to their pre-immigration and perceived new country options, and when they rely on co-ethnic networks for work. As long as job-relevant networks are ethnically based, ethnically inclusive ties have the unintended effect of excluding others from the niche. Inclusionary and exclusionary practices transpire simultaneously and are mutually reinforcing.
4. *Niche transnationalization*: An immigrant-formed niche may transnationalize if members of a group apply in new countries expertise and resources they developed initially in one specific country. The transnationalization may involve the provisioning of goods or services in new countries that build on the skills, financial, and social capital developed in the original niche. It may also involve the development of “backward supply linkages,” in countries where resources are cheaper, that lower operating costs and contribute to the immigrant group sustaining a competitive edge in the labor market where the niche initially formed. In principle, the niche might also transnationalize through the formation of “forward linkages,” involving the development of new niche-based goods and services marketed across borders. To date, the

Vietnamese, however, have not developed this mode of transnationalization. They did not even develop “forward linkages” in the beauty sector in the U.S., where they established the manicure niche.

The generalizability of these propositions, of course, necessarily awaits in-depth analyses of immigrant involvement in other labor market niches.

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