Gender Relations and Social Media: A Grounded Theory Inquiry of Young Vietnamese Women's Self-Presentations on Facebook

Abstract

Since the introduction of *Đổi Mới* (market economic reforms) in 1986, Vietnam has experienced rapid social, cultural, economic and technological change. This study aims to explore the nexus between gender relations and social media technologies, in particular how young urban Vietnamese women present themselves on Facebook. Grounded theory was employed to inquire into this phenomenon, revealing that the participants use various techniques including presenting an ideal appearance, competency (mastery), positive image and strategies of control. These strategies were interpreted as face-work in which the self is presented to preserve and gain *face*. The participants' self-presentations simultaneously reflect the influence of neoliberalism, Vietnamese communist government discourses and Confucian ethics. Since *Đổi Mới,* these have reconfigured gendered expectations for young women as new aspirational images that serve to obscure structural gender inequalities. While Facebook has the potential to enhance women's lives, findings from this study suggest that it also has the potential to reinforce unequal gender relations.

Key Words: Facebook, Face-Work, Gender Relations, Neoliberalism, Self-Presentation, Vietnamese Women.

Introduction

In 1986 the Vietnamese Government instituted economic reforms (*Đổi Mới*), shifting the country from a centrally planned communist-based economy to a hybridized market-based form of socialism. Since that time Vietnam has experienced rapid social and cultural change as the country integrated into the neoliberal global economy (Schwenkel and Leshkowich, 2012). In addition to market economic reforms, the introduction of the Internet and social media in the early 2000s exposed Vietnam to foreign cultures to a much greater degree, predominately those of the east Asia region that share a Confucian heritage such as China, Korea and Japan (Thomas, 2004) as well as western culture from North America and Western Europe (McCauley, Gumbley, Merola, McDonald, & Do, 2016; Nguyen, 2016). As a result, traditional Confucian values and communist ideology such as collectivism, filial piety, social harmony, nationalism, patriotism and social hierarchies are being challenged by the encroachment of western values and norms such as individualism, consumer culture and neoliberalism[1] (Miho, 2016; Nguyen, Özçaglar-Toulouse, & Kjeldgaard, 2018; Nguyễn and Trần, 2014; Nguyen, 2016).

Since the introduction of the Internet, it has been suggested that new information and communication technologies (ICTs) could help women in developing countries to transform their lives by giving them greater access to information, facilitate networking opportunities and provide a new space in which to raise their voices (UNDAW, 2002). Further, that the Internet has the potential to expand elements of the self through identity experimentation and world-wide interactions (Turkle, 1995). In line with this premise, existing research on social media in Vietnam indicates that it provides a space for political activism and knowledge acquisition (Bui, 2016; Le, 2018). However, little is known about how young women in Vietnam use these new technologies, what their experiences of these are, and its wider meanings for gender relations in the country.

The social media platform Facebook was chosen as the technology for analysis because of its popularity in Vietnam, with more than 60% of the population been active users (Facebook

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[1] Neoliberalism is most often defined as a political economic system that promotes market rule over government decision-making with policy prescriptions including the deregulation of financial markets, trade liberalization and the privatisation of nationalized industries (Peck, Brenner, & Theodore, 2018). Nevertheless, neoliberalism is more than just an economic system, it also influences subjectivities in line with market-based logics (McDonald, Gough, Wearing, & Deville, 2017; McGuigan, 2016).

Business, 2015). The study aims to inquire into the self-presentations of young urban Vietnamese women to understand the way in which they perceive and present themselves on Facebook and the social interactions they experience. In recent years, social networking sites such as Facebook have been used to analyze self-presentations (Dahiya, 2016; Farquhar, 2013; Fisher, Boland, & Lyytinen, 2016; Saker & Evans, 2016). As Cover (2015, p. 1) claims, social media such as Facebook provides a window into how one's "identity is both expressed and acquired" since it facilitates social interactions and networking.

The article begins with some background information on Facebook use and a brief review of the literature on gender relations in Vietnam. This is followed by a description of the grounded theory method used to collect and analyze the participants' experiences. The findings outline the different techniques of self-presentation that participants use in their Facebook usage. These techniques are interpreted using the concept of face and face-work. Further, the participants' selfpresentations represent a negotiation between the competing values of neoliberalism, the Vietnamese communist government agenda and Confucian ethics.

Facebook Usage in Vietnam

Vietnam is reported to have approximately 65 million active Internet users, 55 million of which are frequent users of Facebook (We Are Social, 2017, 2018). The Vietnamese spend more time on Facebook than any other site, with those aged 18–30 accounting for more than 70% of users. Vietnamese users spend an average of 2.5 hours per day on Facebook, which is 13% above the global average (Facebook Business, 2015). Its popularity stems from its ability to provide a wide range of instantaneous information regarding people's personal lives and opportunities for social interaction and self-expression (Burkell, Fortier, Wong, & Simpson, 2014; Cover, 2015).

Hong and Na (2018) argue that Facebook use reflects culturally appropriate ways of sustaining and reinforcing cultural values and attitudes. While certain universal behaviors are dictated by the global capabilities and design of the platform itself, each culture and nation are influenced by a set of contextual factors that shape engagement with the site. By employing western theories from the vantage point of modern Asia it is possible to create an approximate understanding of human communication as it relates to the Asian context (Dissanayake, 2009). Nevertheless, there is a need to go further by developing theories that account for the unique cultural context and experience of young Vietnamese women (Wei, 2016).

Gender Relations in Vietnam

Gender relations are defined in this study as the relative status that exists between women and men, which are socially determined, by history, culture, economics and politics (Institute for Social Transformation, 2018). Advancing gender equality has been one of the central tenets of the Vietnamese communist government since it came to power in North Vietnam in 1945. The discourse on gender equality fits the governments development and modernizing agenda as it sought to separate itself from the dark days of the country's feudal past (Drummond & Rydström, 2004). However, a number of authors argue that Vietnam is still a largely patriarchal society as evidenced by high rates of gender-based violence, poor representation of women in the media and politics, and their continued discrimination in the workplace (Duong, 2001; Mate, McDonald, & Do, 2018; Nguyễn, 2011; Vũ, Dương, Barnett, & Lee, 2016).

One of the most pervasive cultural forces that continues to influence gender relations in Vietnamese society is Confucianism (Thêm, 1997; Truong, Hallinger, & Sanga, 2017). Traditional Vietnamese society prescribes that women obey their fathers and husbands, behaving in a passive servile manner. Further, that they aspire to marriage, child rearing and a life inside the home – cooking, cleaning and caring for dependent family members (Duong, 2001; Earl, 2014; Teerawichitchainan, Knodel, Loi, & Huy, 2010). The country became increasingly influenced by communist ideology and its promotion of nationalism, patriotism and solidarity after the communist party came to power in North Vietnam in 1945 and South Vietnam in 1975 (Grosse, 2015). However, the institution of free-market economic reforms in 1986 has led to an increasing exposure to foreign media and values, as well as a move toward a consumer culture (Earl, 2014; Owen, 2005). While the Vietnamese Government has enjoyed the fruits of high economic growth rates, it continues to remain ambivalent and apprehensive toward global integration at it struggles to deal with its people's rapidly changing values, beliefs and attitudes (Schwenkel & Leshkowich, 2012).

Urban migration into Ho Chi Minh City and other Southern urban areas have escalated since *Đổi Mới* as employment and educational opportunities grew in these industrializing zones (Earl, 2014). Young women living in urban areas of Vietnam are influenced by traditional Vietnamese values embedded in the local communities and family; however, they simultaneously consume alternative values from the West through greater access to social media and the Internet. A combination of traditional Confucian ethics such as filial piety, maternal devotion and marital faithfulness, the communist government's nationalist agenda and promotion of family, community and nation, along with neoliberal notions of economic freedom, enterprise and entrepreneurship, all vie with one another to influence the thinking, feelings and behaviors of young urban women (Earl, 2013, 2014).

Method: Grounded Theory

Research Design

Dobson (2015) and Wei (2016) argue that researchers should approach young women's digital cultures with a view to learn something about their lives within particular contexts, rather than with the intent to measure their media practices against pre-existing theoretical criteria. In line with these authors and the exploratory nature of this study, grounded theory was used to collect and analyze the participants' accounts of their self-presentations on Facebook. Participants in a grounded theory study guide the researcher towards life-stories, events and experiences that are meaningful to them within the parameters (the topic) of the investigation (Charmaz, 2015), which, in this study, is to understand how young Vietnamese women present themselves on Facebook.

Participants & Recruitment

Participants for the study were young women (18-30 years) born after 1986, currently residing in the Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) area and were required to be active users of Facebook. Each of the participants held a high school diploma or above. This cohort was selected for three main reasons: (1) they grew up during the country's transition to a market-based economy and consumer culture and so are more likely to have been influenced by changes in social and cultural norms that have occurred during this period, (2) their residence in HCMC meant they are likely to be the vanguard of change in the country, and (3) they have ready access to communication technologies and the products, services and experiences of consumer society (King, Nguyen, & Minh, 2008). A purposive sample of eighteen participants in total were recruited for the study. The first 8 participants were recruited from the first and third authors professional and personal networks.

The next group of 10 participants were recruited using a snowball technique.

Data Collection & Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The aim of the interviews was to elicit theoretical categories concerning young Vietnamese women's self-presentations and social interactions on Facebook. Participants were asked to discuss their Facebook profile, posts and interaction on such posts, and other activities they engage in. They were also asked about their behaviors on Facebook as it relates to elements of gender; for example: 'Can you discuss the usage behaviors on Facebook among your male and female friends? What would you say are the similarities and differences between the genders?' Follow-up questions sometimes moved beyond the Facebook experience to inquire into the participants' opinions with regards to their day-to-day lived experience as there is an intimate relationship between the offline and online world (Iwilade, 2015). The average time for each of the interviews was between 50-60 minutes. To ensure consistency and reliability in the data collection process, the first and third author interviewed the first set of 8 participants together before conducting the later interviews separately.

The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese over a six-month period starting in early 2018 and then transcribed into English for analysis. In the first step, initial coding was conducted where each line of the data was examined in order to define the 'event experience' and its associated meaning (Charmaz, 2015). Earlier codes were then selected, synthesized and categorized to develop focused codes. The first 8 participants were followed up with a second interview to collect further data as conceptual categories emerged. These categories were then cross-examined between the four authors. At this stage, interview questions were amended to take into account the emerging categories. The next 6 participants were interviewed while the emerging data was analyzed simultaneously to gain a better understanding of the convergence and divergence between the participants' experiences. Variations within and between categories were also identified and noted in memos, which were written throughout the interviews and analysis process in order to redefine, analyze and compare categories. In the last step, theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was employed where the last 4 participants were interviewed to further develop theoretical categories after which data saturation was achieved.

Limitations

While the aim of this study has been to understand young urban Vietnamese women's selfpresentation on Facebook, the amount of time and resources available meant that we were limited to interviewing women from HCMC only. We acknowledge that important regional and urban/rural differences exist in Vietnam, which our study was not able to capture.

Findings: Techniques of Self-Presentation

Analysis of the data revealed that the participants are highly conscientious in the way they present themselves on Facebook. 'Techniques of self-presentation' was theorized as a core category that comprised of: (1) presenting an ideal appearance, (2) competency (mastery), (3) a positive image and (4) evolving strategies of control (see Figure 1). The four techniques will be discussed along with the motivations that drive them which include a combination of Confucianism, communist government and neoliberal ideology. Analysis of the findings and a conceptual model of the participants' experiences are then presented in the following section.

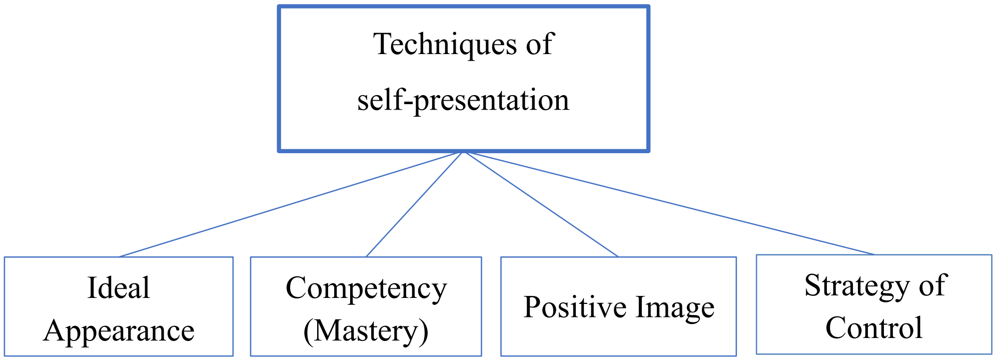

Figure 1. Self-Presentation of Young Vietnamese Women on Facebook.

Ideal Appearance

All of the participants emphasized the importance of presenting a beautiful self. This means possessing and presenting an image that match, as much as possible, the ideal beauty standards for

Vietnamese women, emphasizing one's face and thin body figure. Beauty most often referred to one's physical appearance, however, in some cases, one's behavior was also referred to as a constitutive trait of beauty.

Photographs are the primary means of presenting the self visually on Facebook. Therefore, the participants were concerned when they were tagged in photos on other people's Facebook sites. Participant 6 said that: *'If I don't look good in the photo, I don't accept it on my timeline'*, expressing the importance she placed on managing how her visual appearance was perceived by others. When asked whether they get comments on their physical appearance, participant 9 answered:

> *Yes [...] When I'm tagged in a photo, my friends may comment that I look fat. People mostly talk about me being fat. […] I think body shaming is prevalent on Facebook, which is why I rarely upload photos of my full body. I don't want to be body-shamed.*

Participant 9's feelings of shame were the result of peer pressure and surveillance through which the beauty standard of thinness in Vietnam is perpetuated (Dobson, 2015; Gill, 2019). Several methods were reported by most of the participants in the way they presented themselves that fit with this thin ideal, including: (1) only posting photos taken by yourself so as to maintain complete control, (2) not uploading or allowing any group photo where one does not look beautiful and thin to appear on a personal Facebook page and (3) regularly monitoring one's weight in order to maintain as much as possible an ideal body shape.

Participant 9, like a number of others, felt that *'women are not only expected to be beautiful, but also to be "good". Like being polite and obey the elders; dress discreetly; not go clubbing nor smoking, for example. I think parents are pressured to show to other people that their girls are well behaved like that'*. This is also evident from the way in which some participants criticized the behaviors of others on Facebook. Participant 5 said she was frustrated when *'I see my male friends* *share things about girls. Or they say flirty words or comments on sexy posts.'* Participant 8 believes that the modern Vietnamese women should not reveal their body too much, implying that it is inappropriate for well-educated women to present themselves in such manner.

The cultural pressure to be beautiful is particularly gendered in the way it singles out young women. They explained that their male peers do not experience the same level of pressure when it comes to presenting visual images of themselves. '*Women prefer posting beautiful photos whereas men accept all kind of photos. They don't care if they look good or not*' (Participant 7). Such differences in expectation is deep-rooted in Vietnamese culture where a women's primary value lay in her looks and womanly manner, while men's main value lay in their competency and ability to provide for their family.

Competency (Mastery)

Being perceived as competent emerged as the second most common element in the way that our participants managed their self-presentations on Facebook. For example, one participant noted: *'I'm using Facebook as a personal branding channel, so I'd like people to see myself as a capable person'* (Participant 1). Participant 4 mentioned a similar idea, claiming that receiving other's positive confirmation would indicate one's competency.

The majority of the participants believed in the importance of women being financially independent and expressed a sense of pride in taking part in the workforce and having a career. It was important to be seen to be independent, taking responsibility for oneself and presenting the best possible self to the world. Actively managing one's life in this way conferred a degree of 'modern' status because it meant not having to depend on men and marriage to enjoy one's life. For example, Participant 15 said: *'I never want to put myself in a position that I am dependent on men.'*

However, not all participants were supported by their peers and family in the way they presented themselves as competent women. Participant 7 spoke of her frustration and struggle concerning her desire to continue her education:

> *When I decided to study Masters, I struggled so much because people kept telling me that a girl shouldn't study that much because I might not be able to get married. They also said a girl like me shouldn't earn that much money.*

These values reflect Vietnam's traditional gender roles and relations. Despite being expected to work and take care of the family, including raising children, taking care of elderly parents and doing housework, women are expected to be academically and financially inferior, or at best equal, to their husband. If a woman is either financially or academically superior to their male counterpart, it could be considered a threat to the male's position in the family and their face - a socially approved image of the self. This reflects the continued dominance of Confucian values (patriarchal structures) in Vietnamese society where a women's role is considered to be largely inside the home and in a position that is below their husband (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011) (Higgins, 2015; Knodel, Loi, Jayakody, & Huy, 2005; Nguyen & Simkin, 2015).

Another issue of concern for the participants was the manner in which they interacted with other Facebook users. For example, they rarely engaged in debates on serious topics or issues, believing that it is important to maintain harmony in their interactions with others. This reflects a long-standing cultural norm in Vietnamese society in which people are expected to behave in ways that maintain social harmony, which often means avoiding getting into debates or arguments on important social issues for fear of causing offence (Schuler et al., 2006). There was also common agreement that they did not feel confident in presenting their opinions if they could not back these up with a compelling set of arguments or evidence. Despite describing herself as a high-achiever and a confident person, Participant 13 said that she never engages in any debates on Facebook for fear of not been able to defend her opinions and, therefore, maintain a degree competency in the eyes of others. She said that '*my Facebook page is more like my face and my identity. If I can't back up my arguments strong enough, it will harm my identity and image.*'

Positive Image

As well as presenting an image of competence, the participants desired to be viewed by others as being 'positive'. This includes positive visual presentations of the self and behaviors. They sought to achieve this by not posting anything that could be construed as negative or expressing discontent. '*I want my image on Facebook to be positive. Things that I share on my Facebook are either neutral or positive. I don't share any negative thing on my Facebook*' (Participant 2). Participant 3 explained that she only presented the good side of herself on Facebook: '*I think women should show their beauties and hide their ugliness or weakness. Beauty in this sense includes both appearance and personality.'*

The participants often chose to ignore text or images that they viewed as sexist or discriminatory towards women because they did not wish to offend or to come across as being angry or negative in anyway. They accepted that others were entitled to freedom of speech (to have their own opinion), however, they did not feel that it was proper to challenge others' views of gender that they themselves may strongly disagree with, indicating a degree of passivity. For example, Participant 4 spoke about her anger towards what she felt was an outdated or inappropriate celebration of traditional gender roles in the home. She then described her feelings when seeing her friend accept such attitudes on Facebook:

> *I don't criticize. That's their choice and freedom to post whatever they want. I feel a bit uncomfortable when seeing that but not for long. It's their freedom anyway. […] But I do feel annoyed sometimes. For example, I have a male friend just got married and […] then*

> *he posted something on Facebook that read 'I'm so happy to have a wife now. Before, when I woke up in the morning nobody cooks me a meal and I went to the office with empty stomach, but now when I wake up, a meal is already ready for me to eat.' And many people came in and gave compliments to him and I was so pissed off.*

Despite her aversion to the post, she did not seek to challenge this person's attitudes as she believed that: *'it's worthless and would never take me to anywhere. [...] I want to avoid online conflict and it's really hard to change points of view of people especially via comments or feedback online'* (Participant 4). She believed that she too was entitled to freedom of speech and could have challenged these viewpoints, but chosen not to. The discourse of *choice* was invoked to justify their decision not to challenge sexist or discriminatory Facebook postings.

Positivity, as defined by the participants, also extends to the way in which they present their work-life. Participant 7 believes that care needed to be taken to avoid posts that could deviate from a positive 'professional' image, which they defined as the ability to '*work well and tolerate pressure*'. She believes that '*we shouldn't complain about our job on Facebook as this looks unprofessional'*.

Evolving Strategies of Control

The majority of the participants articulated a 'maturing over time' when it came to their Facebook use. They exerted increasing levels of control over their online image. Several participants used to accept all friend requests on Facebook; however, with time they became more selective in adding new friends.

> *My Facebook friend list only has around 290 friends. I used to have a lot more friends. When we were young, we wanted to have as many friends as possible although we didn't know them. But now, I must think carefully about people I add.* (Participant 6)

To create a space in order to simultaneously present herself more freely and with more control, Participant 18 created two Facebook accounts, one for family members and relatives and another for friends; the latter is used more frequently. A number of other participants reported removing or blocking their family members, reserving their Facebook account for close friends and acquaintances only. Speaking of her family members and relatives, Participant 7 said *'they are in different generation with me so they can't understand what young people post on Facebook'.*

Besides taking more control over who they befriend on Facebook, the participants also developed strategies around how often they post and what they post. They actively controlled who they allowed to see their posts through predefined groups of friends. Alternatively, they used the group message functions so only relevant friends were involved. A clear trend emerged amongst the participants where over time they came to view their Facebook accounts as formal means of representation in both social and professional spheres and so their modes of sharing and interactions became more strategic. Participant 5 explained: '*I want people to respect me. That's why I don't want to post idiotic things on Facebook*.' One participant, a teacher, was admonished for liking something on Facebook that her manager perceived as childlike and so not befitting a teacher working in a public primary school. Images that do not fit the young, good-looking, competent women are actively censored through peer surveillance and self-surveillance. As a result, participants' personal Facebook pages are cultivated to fit a gendered 'good-self ideal' (e.g. beautiful, competent, positive) for select groups of Facebook friends and colleagues. In summary, their behaviors became more fastidious and strategic over time as they sought to more closely monitor their behaviors and performance, aiming to demonstrate the most desirable version of the self.

Discussion: Negotiating Identity

Analysis of the participants' interviews indicates that the techniques and strategies they use to present themselves on Facebook can best be described as a process of negotiating with competing values informed by neoliberalism, the Vietnamese communist government agenda and Confucian ethics. The core category – techniques of self-presentation – was conceptualized along with *competing values* and *social acceptance & self-enhancement* as a process that participants engage in when presenting themselves on Facebook (see Figure 2).

The competing values that have come to characterize Vietnamese society inform what is considered to be a socially accepted image of the self (*face)*, motivating young urban women to engage in *face-work*. In other words, in responding to the pressures exerted by these competing values, the participants sought to express themselves in ways that gain social acceptance and selfenhancement in order to preserve and gain *face* through their techniques of self-presentation. As outlined in the findings, these techniques include: (1) expressing their ideal appearance, (2) competence (mastery), (3) positive images and views on life and (4) strategies of control.

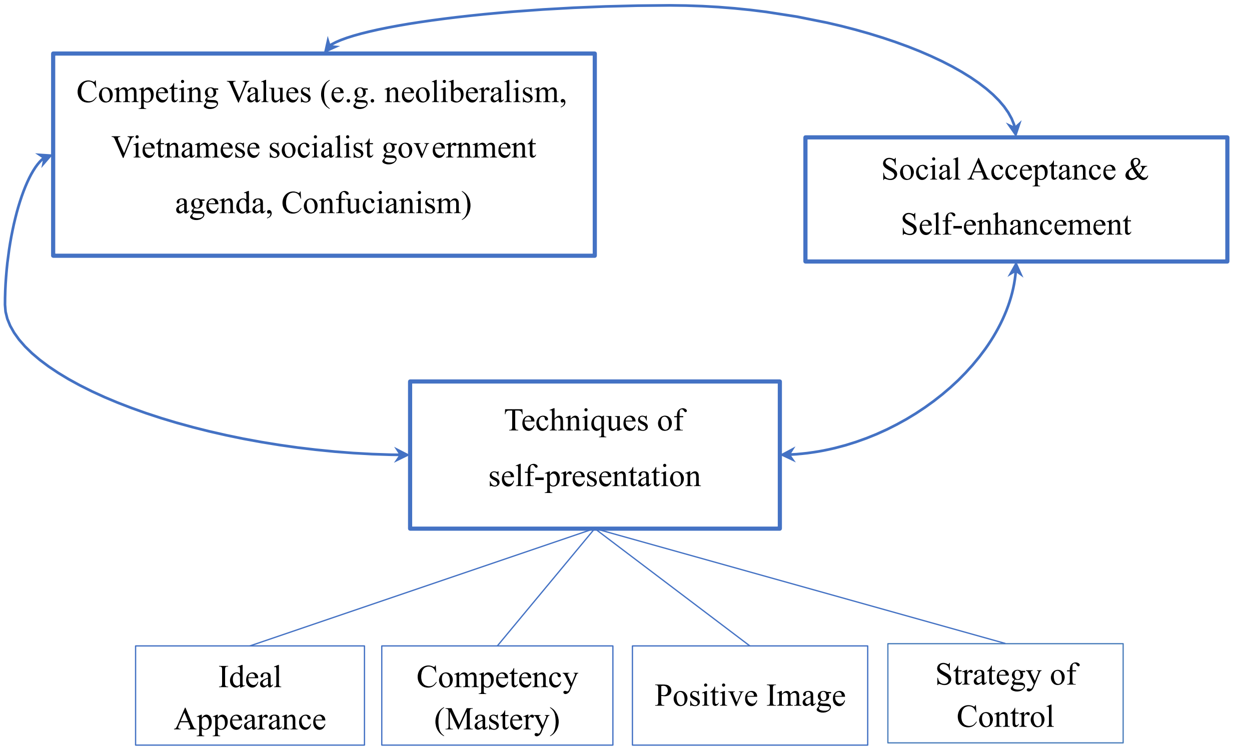
Competing Values (e.g. neoliberalism, Vietnamese socialist government agenda, Confucianism)
Social Acceptance & Self-enhancement
Techniques of self-presentation
Ideal Appearance
Competency (Mastery)
Positive Image
Strategy of Control

Figure 2. The process of negotiating identity of young Vietnamese women on Facebook.

Face and Face-Work on Facebook in Vietnam

The concept of face-work comprises "actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with the face" (Goffman, 1967, p. 12). The concept of *face* therefore is defined as "an image of self-delineation in terms of approved social attributes" (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). These notions and their recent conceptualization (Ivana, 2016; Qi, 2011) provide a basis to understand the participants' motivations for the particular ways in which they present themselves on Facebook and, more broadly, the digital experience in a Confucian communist culture that is currently being challenged by neoliberal globalizing forces.

The theorization of face by Chinese scholars provides a vantage point for understanding the concept in a Confucian culture such as Vietnam (e.g. Brunner & You, 1988; Hu, 1944; Qi, 2011). Taking the Chinese conception of face as a point of departure, Ivana (2016) sought to extend Goffman's (1967) theory of face-work, arguing for a more dynamic understanding[2]. Ivana (2016, p. 113) sought to demonstrate that the Chinese conception of face is less polarized and volatile in that face is grounded "in a series of attributes that are not directly derived from the norms of interaction". For example, such attributes could be one's level of education, family background, friends and community.

Through our participants' discussion of their Facebook use, *face* was found to be central. Our participants referred to their Facebook profile as their 'face', their 'personal branding', or an 'enhanced version of [the] self'. In Vietnamese culture and the East Asian context more broadly, face is linked to one's "honour (*danh dự*), self-respect (*lòng tự trọng*), pride (*lòng kiêu hãnh*) and dignity (*phẩm giá, phẩm chất*), all in relation to expectations and evaluations from other people" (Nguyen & Simkin, 2015, p. 3; see also Qi, 2011). In other words, *face-work* – performed through techniques of self-presentation – can be understood as the strategies employed to ensure that images of the self, which are closely linked to one's *face*, meet the prescribed cultural values. Findings from the study indicate that the participants' techniques of self-presentation on Facebook suggests that it is not simply a digital space that permits social interactions that transcend space and time, but that it also provides a means to align one's self-image with cultural norms. The face, and the manner in which it prescribes cultural values, constrains the opportunity for young women to experiment with their self-presentations.

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[2] Goffman's (1967) definition of face and face-work has an episodic characteristic in that every interaction can lead to either winning or losing face. In other words, Goffmanian face is bounded by interaction norms only.

Performing Gender in the Process of Negotiating Identity

The participants' techniques of self-presentation on Facebook indicate an ongoing process of negotiating with a competing set of values, norms and lifestyles. This process of negotiation can be seen in the way that gender is perceived and performed by our participants.

In discussing their Facebook use, the participants desired to present an image of the *good woman* which is defined by how well they undertake their roles as a daughter, wife and/or mother who takes responsibility and contributes to the social, economic and domestic spheres of life. This finding is consistent with previous research on women in Vietnam where they are expected to fulfil the dual roles of producer – contributing financially to the family – and reproducer – performing maintenance work inside the home (Werner, 2009). This *dual role* increasingly emerged after 1986 as the country moved toward a market economy, or version of neoliberal economy (Nguyen-Vo, 2012). Since its institution, the government has encouraged citizens, especially women, to take up paid work. However, to maintain its monopoly on political power, the Vietnamese government continues to discipline women in the social and cultural realms (Nguyen-Vo, 2012). These discourses range from the moralization of female sexuality to confine it within the roles of wife and mother while demonizing prostitution and the consumption of sexually explicit material (Drummond & Rydström, 2004). Therefore, the particular version of neoliberalism promoted by the Vietnamese government allows women to develop professional/career opportunities outside the home in order to drive greater economic prosperity, however, social and personal life is still largely patriarchal (Drummond & Rydström, 2004; Higgins, 2015; Werner, 2009). The findings indicate that young urban women have embraced many aspects of consumer culture and that they wish to present an *entrepreneurial-self* in their careers and professional lives. However, they are still expected live within the norms prescribed by traditional Vietnamese values.

We observed some similarities in the way our participants perform gender on Facebook with what has been termed the *neoliberal feminist subject* in the Western context (Rottenberg, 2014). This can be seen to a degree in their presentation of a competent and positive image, along with a desire to demonstrate their ability to succeed in study, career, family, as well as to be financially independent. Based on a market logic, our participants believed that presenting a competent self is a means to resist patriarchal norms that oppress women economically, intellectually and physically, as well as to participate in modern society in which an active citizen is able to effectively compete in the market place (McGuigan, 2016). It was also perceived as a means to achieve a higher social status, to be seen as a 'modern woman' who is able to successfully compete like men.

Although the participants expressed a degree of empowerment in the economic sphere, they were also aware that they were responsible for maintaining the home, whether they work or not, which the majority viewed as inevitable. In relation to men, the majority of Vietnamese women continue to have greater burdens placed upon them (e.g. Teerawichitchainan, et al., 2010). However, some of the participants felt that Vietnam had achieved gender equality or at least did not view gender relations as a problematic issue. For example, *'I see no gender differences in this'* (Participant 1), *'I just don't think about gender'* (Participant 3). In discussing gender relations, Participant 3 stated that *'since I was little, I have always tried to prove myself to be a bit masculine. Like I always try to prove that whatever men can do, I can do it as well.'*

In the past decade, the government, through state-owned media and various international forums, have claimed that gender equality has been largely achieved in Vietnam (Khuat, 2016; World Bank, 2011). These gender-neutral, gender-blind discourses, are a common feature of the Vietnamese government's propaganda, which claims that issues of gender equality are being tackled with many notable advances now achieved. Part of the problem is that discourses of economic freedom can give a sense of choice and empowerment, however, the danger is that these can make "feminism seem both second nature and unnecessary" (Baer, 2016, p. 17). Many of the so-called advances and achievements in gender equality and relations are contained in government rhetoric only as the experience of life for many Vietnamese women remains to be highly problematic (e.g. Duong, 2001; Schuler, et al., 2006).

This set of conditions can be understood through a postfeminist perspective, which begins with the intensifying of gendered expectations and labour in contemporary societies, which are reworked and rebranded under the name of agency, choice and empowerment (McRobbie, 2009). This perspective has been invoked to theorize the condition of women's lives in western neoliberal political economies where there has been an economization of feminity (Adkins, 2018; Gill, 2008). Dosekun (2015) argues that postfeminist theory could be used as a transnational analytical tool in that it is useful for understanding the rhetoric of choice and empowerment among more privileged women in the global South, while turning a blind eye to existing systems of gender inequality. In Vietnam, many of the day-to-day conditions that women live with indicate that true liberation is still a long way off. For example, discrimination, mistreatment and violence toward women remain stubbornly high and prevalent in all strata of Vietnamese society (Rydstrøm, 2010; Vu, Schuler, Hoang, & Quach, 2014; World Bank, 2011).

Some of the participants described experiencing a dissonance as they attempted to balance the competing notions of womanhood in contemporary Vietnamese society. A number of the participants expressed concern and felt pressured to live up to such expectations. For example, Participant 2 articulated: *'It's overwhelming, indeed. It's an end that I always try to work my way toward. I think it's beneficial for me to have a career, contribute to the society as well as a loving family to take care of'*. Some participants voiced that this ideal was *'unrealistic'* and *'impossible to fulfil both at once'* (Participant 4, Participant 9). A number of other participants felt a sense of injustice when it came to gendered expectations, the division of labour in Vietnamese society, as well as general Vietnamese societal attitudes toward women. However, they indicated a reluctance to ever voice their feelings on Facebook.

Kidd (2017) analyzed the relationship between social media platforms and social inequality, concluding that users are constantly exposed to narratives that either normalize social inequality through victim blaming, distraction and titillation, or subsuming it under the idea that everyone is viewed as equal in the eyes of the global neoliberal political economic system. In line with Han's (2017, p. 61) critique of neoliberalism, we suggest that Facebook offers a platform through which the "digitalized, networked subject is a panopticon[3] of itself". Feminist scholar Alison Winch (2013) uses the term 'girlfriend gaze' to describe the way in which young women watch and police each other's appearance and conduct. Gill (2019) argues that while these forms of surveillance circulate across gender lines their primary target continues to be women.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to investigate the meaning that social media, in the case of this study Facebook, might have for gender relations in Vietnam. By inquiring into the way in which young women present themselves on Facebook we have sought to understand gender relations in light of new ICTs. This study found that the participants' self-presentation techniques – presenting an ideal physical appearance, competence (mastery), positive attitudes and views on life, and strategies of control – simultaneously reflect the influence of the neoliberal global economy and the Vietnamese communist government agenda. Drawing on the concepts of face and face-work (Goffman, 1959, 1967; Ivana, 2016; Qi, 2011), we suggest that face provides a vantage point to understand self-presentation and interaction on Facebook in Vietnam and other East Asian cultures.

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[3] The panopticon (meaning: *all seeing*) is a circular tower composed of individual prison cells on the outside with the guard's house positioned on the inside, which enables the guard to observe prisoners at all times. Its design means that prisoners are never aware of when they are being watched, so they are compelled to regulate their behaviors at all times. The French philosopher Michel Foucault used the panopticon metaphorically to illustrate the individual's own subjection in modern society, as they watch themselves from the position of the observer through the process of internalising the *eye* of society (Olssen, 2006).

The present study provides some insights into how notions of womanhood in the early 21st century Vietnam is been reconfigured by different cultural forces and how these can be analyzed through and influenced by social media use. The aspirational image of a beautiful woman who excels in the dual roles of producer and reproducer has come to represent a new ideal for urban women. This ideal represents an internalization of neoliberal entrepreneurial values and Vietnamese government rhetoric, both of which obscure structural gender inequalities. What is noteworthy is the resemblance between the notion of the emerging 'ideal good Vietnamese women' in Vietnam and the economization of feminity through which women's empowerment has been co-opted for the purpose of increasing economic growth as opposed to liberating women from traditional patriarchal structures. Women have been led to believe, via government rhetoric, that Vietnam has now achieved gender equity, which can be seen in its gender-blind and gender-neutral discourses along with evidence of women's greater access to health care, education and professional careers. While a number of participants expressed their discontent toward the emerging dual roles of women in our interviews, they continue to find it challenging to voice their opinions on Facebook as it might damage their *face* if it is not positively evaluated by others.

Social networking sites like Facebook provide a space for self-understanding and selfexpression (Robards, 2014). However, it also has the potential to act as a space in which societal surveillance is intensified and internalized. These forms of self-surveillance place a question mark over the potential for ICTs to transform women's lives. Li and Jung (2018) write that although the popularity of social media in east Asian countries have fostered greater participation in the global public sphere, online and offline relationships in these countries are still heavily influenced by local cultural norms. This study suggests that the culturally inherited concern about *face* on Facebook can serve to intensify some of the existing social values that maintain unequal gender relations and that there is a potential for Facebook to descend into a form of digital panopticon.

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Gender Relations and Social Media: A Grounded Theory Inquiry of Young Vietnamese Women's Self-Presentations on Facebook

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Gender Relations and Social Media: A Grounded Theory Inquiry of Young Vietnamese Women's Self-Presentations on Facebook

Abstract

Since the introduction of *Đổi Mới* (market economic reforms) in 1986, Vietnam has experienced rapid social, cultural, economic and technological change. This study aims to explore the nexus between gender relations and social media technologies, in particular how young urban Vietnamese women present themselves on Facebook. Grounded theory was employed to inquire into this phenomenon, revealing that the participants use various techniques including presenting an ideal appearance, competency (mastery), positive image and strategies of control. These strategies were interpreted as face-work in which the self is presented to preserve and gain *face*.

The participants' self-presentations simultaneously reflect the influence of neoliberalism, Vietnamese communist government discourses and Confucian ethics. Since *Đổi Mới,* these have reconfigured gendered expectations for young women as new aspirational images that serve to obscure structural gender inequalities. While Facebook has the potential to enhance women's lives, findings from this study suggest that it also has the potential to reinforce unequal gender relations.

Key Words: Facebook, Face-Work, Gender Relations, Neoliberalism, Self-Presentation, Vietnamese Women.

Introduction

In 1986 the Vietnamese Government instituted economic reforms (*Đổi Mới*), shifting the country from a centrally planned communist-based economy to a hybridized market-based form of socialism. Since that time Vietnam has experienced rapid social and cultural change as the country integrated into the neoliberal global economy (Schwenkel and Leshkowich, 2012). In addition to market economic reforms, the introduction of the Internet and social media in the early 2000s exposed Vietnam to foreign cultures to a much greater degree, predominately those of the east Asia region that share a Confucian heritage such as China, Korea and Japan (Thomas, 2004) as well as western culture from North America and Western Europe (McCauley, Gumbley, Merola, McDonald, & Do, 2016; Nguyen, 2016). As a result, traditional Confucian values and communist ideology such as collectivism, filial piety, social harmony, nationalism, patriotism and social hierarchies are being challenged by the encroachment of western values and norms such as individualism, consumer culture and neoliberalism[4] (Miho, 2016; Nguyen, Özçaglar-Toulouse, & Kjeldgaard, 2018; Nguyễn and Trần, 2014; Nguyen, 2016).

Since the introduction of the Internet, it has been suggested that new information and communication technologies (ICTs) could help women in developing countries to transform their lives by giving them greater access to information, facilitate networking opportunities and provide a new space in which to raise their voices (UNDAW, 2002). Further, that the Internet has the potential to expand elements of the self through identity experimentation and world-wide interactions (Turkle, 1995). In line with this premise, existing research on social media in Vietnam indicates that it provides a space for political activism and knowledge acquisition (Bui, 2016; Le, 2018). However, little is known about how young women in Vietnam use these new technologies, what their experiences of these are, and its wider meanings for gender relations in the country.

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[4] Neoliberalism is most often defined as a political economic system that promotes market rule over government decision-making with policy prescriptions including the deregulation of financial markets, trade liberalization and the privatisation of nationalized industries (Peck, Brenner, & Theodore, 2018). Nevertheless, neoliberalism is more than just an economic system, it also influences subjectivities in line with market-based logics (McDonald, Gough, Wearing, & Deville, 2017; McGuigan, 2016).

The social media platform Facebook was chosen as the technology for analysis because of its popularity in Vietnam, with more than 60% of the population been active users (Facebook Business, 2015). The study aims to inquire into the self-presentations of young urban Vietnamese women to understand the way in which they perceive and present themselves on Facebook and the social interactions they experience. In recent years, social networking sites such as Facebook have been used to analyze self-presentations (Dahiya, 2016; Farquhar, 2013; Fisher, Boland, &

Lyytinen, 2016; Saker & Evans, 2016). As Cover (2015, p. 1) claims, social media such as Facebook provides a window into how one's "identity is both expressed and acquired" since it facilitates social interactions and networking.

The article begins with some background information on Facebook use and a brief review of the literature on gender relations in Vietnam. This is followed by a description of the grounded theory method used to collect and analyze the participants' experiences. The findings outline the different techniques of self-presentation that participants use in their Facebook usage. These techniques are interpreted using the concept of face and face-work. Further, the participants' self-presentations represent a negotiation between the competing values of neoliberalism, the Vietnamese communist government agenda and Confucian ethics.

Facebook Usage in Vietnam

Vietnam is reported to have approximately 65 million active Internet users, 55 million of which are frequent users of Facebook (We Are Social, 2017, 2018). The Vietnamese spend more time on

Facebook than any other site, with those aged 18–30 accounting for more than 70% of users. Vietnamese users spend an average of 2.5 hours per day on Facebook, which is 13% above the global average (Facebook Business, 2015). Its popularity stems from its ability to provide a wide range of instantaneous information regarding people's personal lives and opportunities for social interaction and self-expression (Burkell, Fortier, Wong, & Simpson, 2014; Cover, 2015). Hong and Na (2018) argue that Facebook use reflects culturally appropriate ways of sustaining and reinforcing cultural values and attitudes. While certain universal behaviors are dictated by the global capabilities and design of the platform itself, each culture and nation are influenced by a set of contextual factors that shape engagement with the site. By employing western theories from the vantage point of modern Asia it is possible to create an approximate understanding of human communication as it relates to the Asian context (Dissanayake, 2009).

Nevertheless, there is a need to go further by developing theories that account for the unique cultural context and experience of young Vietnamese women (Wei, 2016).

Gender Relations in Vietnam

Gender relations are defined in this study as the relative status that exists between women and men, which are socially determined, by history, culture, economics and politics (Institute for Social Transformation, 2018). Advancing gender equality has been one of the central tenets of the Vietnamese communist government since it came to power in North Vietnam in 1945. The discourse on gender equality fits the governments development and modernizing agenda as it sought to separate itself from the dark days of the country's feudal past (Drummond & Rydström, 2004). However, a number of authors argue that Vietnam is still a largely patriarchal society as evidenced by high rates of gender-based violence, poor representation of women in the media and politics, and their continued discrimination in the workplace (Duong, 2001; Mate, McDonald, & Do, 2018; Nguyễn, 2011; Vũ, Dương, Barnett, & Lee, 2016).

One of the most pervasive cultural forces that continues to influence gender relations in Vietnamese society is Confucianism (Thêm, 1997; Truong, Hallinger, & Sanga, 2017). Traditional Vietnamese society prescribes that women obey their fathers and husbands, behaving in a passive servile manner. Further, that they aspire to marriage, child rearing and a life inside the home – cooking, cleaning and caring for dependent family members (Duong, 2001; Earl, 2014; Teerawichitchainan, Knodel, Loi, & Huy, 2010). The country became increasingly influenced by communist ideology and its promotion of nationalism, patriotism and solidarity after the communist party came to power in North Vietnam in 1945 and South Vietnam in 1975 (Grosse, 2015). However, the institution of free-market economic reforms in 1986 has led to an increasing exposure to foreign media and values, as well as a move toward a consumer culture (Earl, 2014; Owen, 2005). While the Vietnamese Government has enjoyed the fruits of high economic growth rates, it continues to remain ambivalent and apprehensive toward global integration at it struggles (Schwenkel & Leshkowich, to deal with its people's rapidly changing values, beliefs and attitudes 2012).

Urban migration into Ho Chi Minh City and other Southern urban areas have escalated since *Đổi Mới* as employment and educational opportunities grew in these industrializing zones (Earl, 2014). Young women living in urban areas of Vietnam are influenced by traditional Vietnamese values embedded in the local communities and family; however, they simultaneously consume alternative values from the West through greater access to social media and the Internet.

A combination of traditional Confucian ethics such as filial piety, maternal devotion and marital faithfulness, the communist government's nationalist agenda and promotion of family, community and nation, along with neoliberal notions of economic freedom, enterprise and entrepreneurship, all vie with one another to influence the thinking, feelings and behaviors of young urban women (Earl, 2013, 2014).

Method: Grounded Theory

Research Design

Dobson (2015) and Wei (2016) argue that researchers should approach young women's digital cultures with a view to learn something about their lives within particular contexts, rather than with the intent to measure their media practices against pre-existing theoretical criteria. In line with these authors and the exploratory nature of this study, grounded theory was used to collect and analyze the participants' accounts of their self-presentations on Facebook. Participants in a grounded theory study guide the researcher towards life-stories, events and experiences that are meaningful to them within the parameters (the topic) of the investigation (Charmaz, 2015), which, in this study, is to understand how young Vietnamese women present themselves on Facebook.

Participants & Recruitment

Participants for the study were young women (18-30 years) born after 1986, currently residing in the Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) area and were required to be active users of Facebook. Each of the participants held a high school diploma or above. This cohort was selected for three main reasons: (1) they grew up during the country's transition to a market-based economy and consumer culture and so are more likely to have been influenced by changes in social and cultural norms that have occurred during this period, (2) their residence in HCMC meant they are likely to be the vanguard of change in the country, and (3) they have ready access to communication technologies and the products, services and experiences of consumer society (King, Nguyen, & Minh, 2008). A purposive sample of eighteen participants in total were recruited for the study. The first 8 participants were recruited from the first and third authors professional and personal networks.

The next group of 10 participants were recruited using a snowball technique.

Data Collection & Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The aim of the interviews was to elicit theoretical categories concerning young Vietnamese women's self-presentations and social interactions on Facebook. Participants were asked to discuss their Facebook profile, posts and interaction on such posts, and other activities they engage in. They were also asked about their behaviors on Facebook as it relates to elements of gender; for example: 'Can you discuss the usage behaviors on Facebook among your male and female friends? What would you say are the similarities and differences between the genders?' Follow-up questions sometimes moved beyond the Facebook experience to inquire into the participants' opinions with regards to their day-to-day lived experience as there is an intimate relationship between the offline and online world (Iwilade, 2015). The average time for each of the interviews was between 50-60 minutes. To ensure consistency and reliability in the data collection process, the first and third author interviewed the first set of 8 participants together before conducting the later interviews separately.

The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese over a six-month period starting in early 2018 and then transcribed into English for analysis. In the first step, initial coding was conducted where each line of the data was examined in order to define the 'event experience' and its associated meaning (Charmaz, 2015). Earlier codes were then selected, synthesized and categorized to develop focused codes. The first 8 participants were followed up with a second interview to collect further data as conceptual categories emerged. These categories were then cross-examined between the four authors. At this stage, interview questions were amended to take into account the emerging categories. The next 6 participants were interviewed while the emerging data was analyzed simultaneously to gain a better understanding of the convergence and divergence between the participants' experiences. Variations within and between categories were also identified and noted in memos, which were written throughout the interviews and analysis process in order to redefine, analyze and compare categories. In the last step, theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was employed where the last 4 participants were interviewed to further develop theoretical categories after which data saturation was achieved.

Limitations

While the aim of this study has been to understand young urban Vietnamese women's self-presentation on Facebook, the amount of time and resources available meant that we were limited to interviewing women from HCMC only. We acknowledge that important regional and urban/rural differences exist in Vietnam, which our study was not able to capture.

Findings: Techniques of Self-Presentation

Analysis of the data revealed that the participants are highly conscientious in the way they present themselves on Facebook. 'Techniques of self-presentation' was theorized as a core category that comprised of: (1) presenting an ideal appearance, (2) competency (mastery), (3) a positive image and (4) evolving strategies of control (see Figure 1). The four techniques will be discussed along with the motivations that drive them which include a combination of Confucianism, communist government and neoliberal ideology. Analysis of the findings and a conceptual model of the participants' experiences are then presented in the following section.

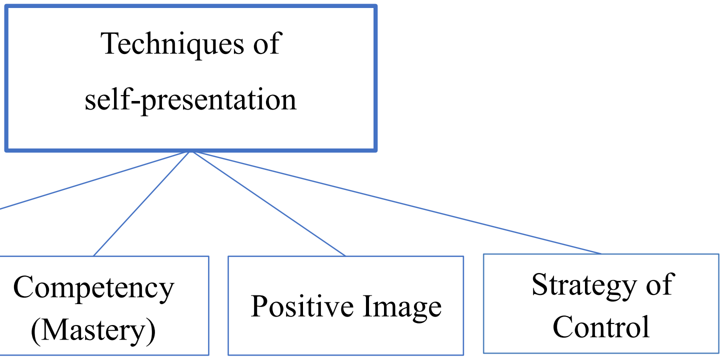
Techniques of self-presentation
Ideal Appearance
Competency (Mastery)
Positive Image
Strategy of Control

Figure 1. Self-Presentation of Young Vietnamese Women on Facebook.

Ideal Appearance

All of the participants emphasized the importance of presenting a beautiful self. This means possessing and presenting an image that match, as much as possible, the ideal beauty standards for Vietnamese women, emphasizing one’s face and thin body figure. Beauty most often referred to one’s physical appearance, however, in some cases, one’s behavior was also referred to as a constitutive trait of beauty.

Photographs are the primary means of presenting the self visually on Facebook. Therefore, the participants were concerned when they were tagged in photos on other people’s Facebook sites. Participant 6 said that: *‘If I don’t look good in the photo, I don’t accept it on my timeline’*, expressing the importance she placed on managing how her visual appearance was perceived by others. When asked whether they get comments on their physical appearance, participant 9 answered:

> *Yes [...] When I’m tagged in a photo, my friends may comment that I look fat. People mostly talk about me being fat. […] I think body shaming is prevalent on Facebook, which is why I rarely upload photos of my full body. I don’t want to be body-shamed.*

Participant 9’s feelings of shame were the result of peer pressure and surveillance through which the beauty standard of thinness in Vietnam is perpetuated (Dobson, 2015; Gill, 2019).

Several methods were reported by most of the participants in the way they presented themselves that fit with this thin ideal, including: (1) only posting photos taken by yourself so as to maintain complete control, (2) not uploading or allowing any group photo where one does not look beautiful and thin to appear on a personal Facebook page and (3) regularly monitoring one’s weight in order to maintain as much as possible an ideal body shape.

Participant 9, like a number of others, felt that *‘women are not only expected to be beautiful, but also to be “good”. Like being polite and obey the elders; dress discreetly; not go clubbing nor smoking, for example. I think parents are pressured to show to other people that their girls are well behaved like that’*. This is also evident from the way in which some participants criticized the behaviors of others on Facebook. Participant 5 said she was frustrated when *‘I see my male friends*

Participant 8 believes

share things about girls. Or they say flirty words or comments on sexy posts.'

that the modern Vietnamese women should not reveal their body too much, implying that it is inappropriate for well-educated women to present themselves in such manner.

The cultural pressure to be beautiful is particularly gendered in the way it singles out young women. They explained that their male peers do not experience the same level of pressure when it comes to presenting visual images of themselves. '*Women prefer posting beautiful photos whereas men accept all kind of photos. They don't care if they look good or not*' (Participant 7). Such differences in expectation is deep-rooted in Vietnamese culture where a women's primary value lay in her looks and womanly manner, while men's main value lay in their competency and ability to provide for their family.

Competency (Mastery)

Being perceived as competent emerged as the second most common element in the way that our participants managed their self-presentations on Facebook. For example, one participant noted:

'I'm using Facebook as a personal branding channel, so I'd like people to see myself as a capable person' (Participant 1). Participant 4 mentioned a similar idea, claiming that receiving other's positive confirmation would indicate one's competency.

The majority of the participants believed in the importance of women being financially independent and expressed a sense of pride in taking part in the workforce and having a career. It was important to be seen to be independent, taking responsibility for oneself and presenting the best possible self to the world. Actively managing one's life in this way conferred a degree of 'modern' status because it meant not having to depend on men and marriage to enjoy one's life. For example, Participant 15 said: *'I never want to put myself in a position that I am dependent on men.'*

However, not all participants were supported by their peers and family in the way they presented themselves as competent women. Participant 7 spoke of her frustration and struggle concerning her desire to continue her education:

> *When I decided to study Masters, I struggled so much because people kept telling me that a girl shouldn't study that much because I might not be able to get married. They also said*

a girl like me shouldn't earn that much money.

These values reflect Vietnam's traditional gender roles and relations. Despite being expected to work and take care of the family, including raising children, taking care of elderly parents and doing housework, women are expected to be academically and financially inferior, or at best equal, to their husband. If a woman is either financially or academically superior to their male counterpart, it could be considered a threat to the male's position in the family and their face - a socially approved image of the self. This reflects the continued dominance of Confucian values (patriarchal structures) in Vietnamese society where a women's role is considered to be largely inside the home and in a position that is below their husband (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011) (Higgins, 2015; Knodel, Loi, Jayakody, & Huy, 2005; Nguyen & Simkin, 2015).

Another issue of concern for the participants was the manner in which they interacted with other Facebook users. For example, they rarely engaged in debates on serious topics or issues, believing that it is important to maintain harmony in their interactions with others. This reflects a long-standing cultural norm in Vietnamese society in which people are expected to behave in ways that maintain social harmony, which often means avoiding getting into debates or arguments on important social issues for fear of causing offence (Schuler et al., 2006). There was also common agreement that they did not feel confident in presenting their opinions if they could not back these up with a compelling set of arguments or evidence. Despite describing herself as a high-achiever and a confident person, Participant 13 said that she never engages in any debates on Facebook for fear of not been able to defend her opinions and, therefore, maintain a degree competency in the eyes of others. She said that '*my Facebook page is more like my face and my identity. If I can't back up my arguments strong enough, it will harm my identity and image.*'

Positive Image

As well as presenting an image of competence, the participants desired to be viewed by others as being 'positive'. This includes positive visual presentations of the self and behaviors. They sought to achieve this by not posting anything that could be construed as negative or expressing discontent. '*I want my image on Facebook to be positive. Things that I share on my Facebook are either neutral or positive. I don't share any negative thing on my Facebook*' (Participant 2). Participant 3 explained that she only presented the good side of herself on Facebook: '*I think women should show their beauties and hide their ugliness or weakness. Beauty in this sense* *includes both appearance and personality.'*

The participants often chose to ignore text or images that they viewed as sexist or discriminatory towards women because they did not wish to offend or to come across as being angry or negative in anyway. They accepted that others were entitled to freedom of speech (to have their own opinion), however, they did not feel that it was proper to challenge others' views of gender that they themselves may strongly disagree with, indicating a degree of passivity. For example, Participant 4 spoke about her anger towards what she felt was an outdated or inappropriate celebration of traditional gender roles in the home. She then described her feelings when seeing her friend accept such attitudes on Facebook:

> *I don't criticize. That's their choice and freedom to post whatever they want. I feel a bit uncomfortable when seeing that but not for long. It's their freedom anyway. […] But I do feel annoyed sometimes. For example, I have a male friend just got married and […] then he posted something on Facebook that read 'I'm so happy to have a wife now. Before, when I woke up in the morning nobody cooks me a meal and I went to the office with empty stomach, but now when I wake up, a meal is already ready for me to eat.' And many people*

came in and gave compliments to him and I was so pissed off.

Despite her aversion to the post, she did not seek to challenge this person's attitudes as she believed that: *'it's worthless and would never take me to anywhere. […] I want to avoid online conflict and it's really hard to change points of view of people especially via comments or feedback online'* (Participant 4). She believed that she too was entitled to freedom of speech and could have challenged these viewpoints, but chosen not to. The discourse of *choice* was invoked to justify their decision not to challenge sexist or discriminatory Facebook postings.

Positivity, as defined by the participants, also extends to the way in which they present their work-life. Participant 7 believes that care needed to be taken to avoid posts that could deviate from a positive 'professional' image, which they defined as the ability to '*work well and tolerate pressure*'. She believes that '*we shouldn't complain about our job on Facebook as this looks unprofessional'*.

Evolving Strategies of Control

The majority of the participants articulated a 'maturing over time' when it came to their Facebook use. They exerted increasing levels of control over their online image. Several participants used to accept all friend requests on Facebook; however, with time they became more selective in adding new friends.

> *My Facebook friend list only has around 290 friends. I used to have a lot more friends. When we were young, we wanted to have as many friends as possible although we didn't know them. But now, I must think carefully about people I add.* (Participant 6)

To create a space in order to simultaneously present herself more freely and with more control, Participant 18 created two Facebook accounts, one for family members and relatives and another for friends; the latter is used more frequently. A number of other participants reported removing or blocking their family members, reserving their Facebook account for close friends and acquaintances only. Speaking of her family members and relatives, Participant 7 said *'they are in different generation with me so they can't understand what young people post on Facebook'.*

Besides taking more control over who they befriend on Facebook, the participants also developed strategies around how often they post and what they post. They actively controlled who they allowed to see their posts through predefined groups of friends. Alternatively, they used the group message functions so only relevant friends were involved. A clear trend emerged amongst the participants where over time they came to view their Facebook accounts as formal means of representation in both social and professional spheres and so their modes of sharing and interactions became more strategic. Participant 5 explained: '*I want people to respect me. That's why I don't want to post idiotic things on Facebook*.' One participant, a teacher, was admonished for liking something on Facebook that her manager perceived as childlike and so not befitting a teacher working in a public primary school. Images that do not fit the young, good-looking, competent women are actively censored through peer surveillance and self-surveillance. As a result, participants' personal Facebook pages are cultivated to fit a gendered 'good-self ideal' (e.g. beautiful, competent, positive) for select groups of Facebook friends and colleagues. In summary, their behaviors became more fastidious and strategic over time as they sought to more closely monitor their behaviors and performance, aiming to demonstrate the most desirable version of the self.

Discussion: Negotiating Identity

Analysis of the participants' interviews indicates that the techniques and strategies they use to present themselves on Facebook can best be described as a process of negotiating with competing values informed by neoliberalism, the Vietnamese communist government agenda and Confucian ethics. The core category – techniques of self-presentation – was conceptualized along with *competing values* and *social acceptance & self-enhancement* as a process that participants engage in when presenting themselves on Facebook (see Figure 2).

The competing values that have come to characterize Vietnamese society inform what is considered to be a socially accepted image of the self (*face)*, motivating young urban women to engage in *face-work*. In other words, in responding to the pressures exerted by these competing values, the participants sought to express themselves in ways that gain social acceptance and self-enhancement in order to preserve and gain *face* through their techniques of self-presentation. As outlined in the findings, these techniques include: (1) expressing their ideal appearance, (2) competence (mastery), (3) positive images and views on life and (4) strategies of control.

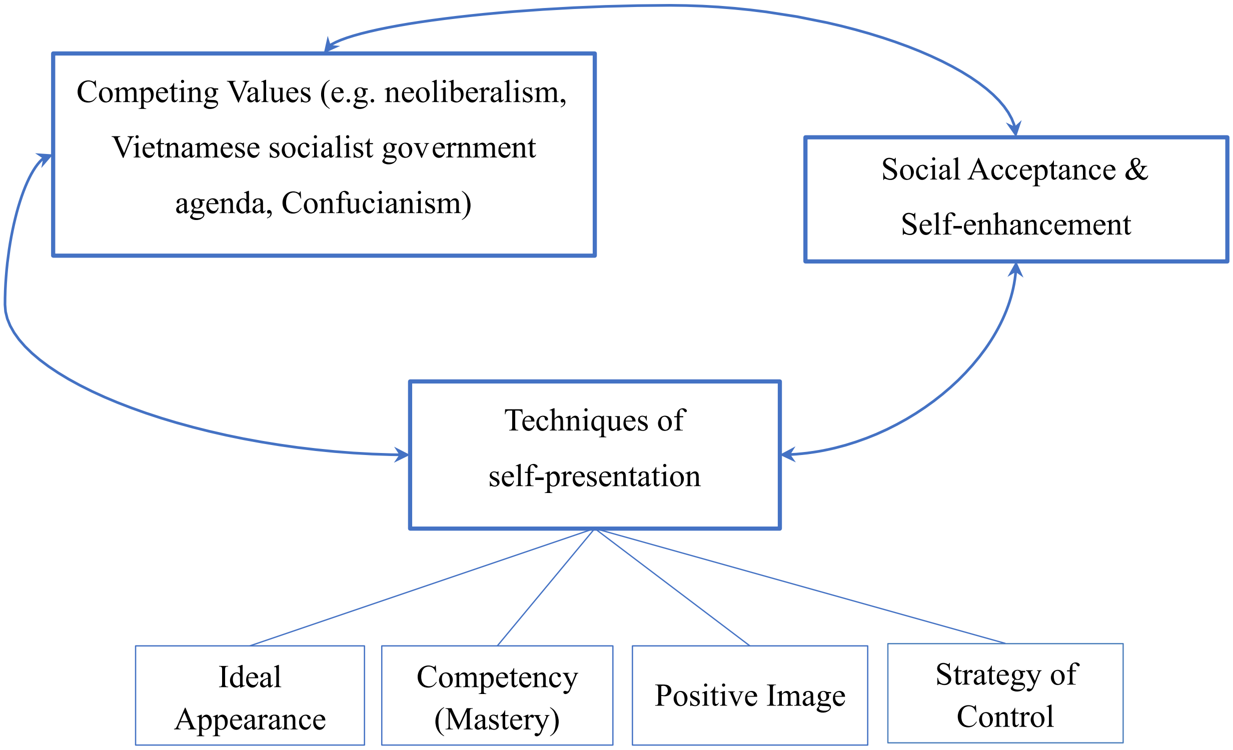
Competing Values (e.g. neoliberalism, Vietnamese socialist government agenda, Confucianism)
Social Acceptance & Self-enhancement
Techniques of self-presentation
Ideal Appearance
Competency (Mastery)
Positive Image
Strategy of Control

Figure 2. The process of negotiating identity of young Vietnamese women on Facebook.

Face and Face-Work on Facebook in Vietnam

The concept of face-work comprises “actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with the face” (Goffman, 1967, p. 12). The concept of *face* therefore is defined as “an image of self-delineation in terms of approved social attributes” (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). These notions and their recent conceptualization (Ivana, 2016; Qi, 2011) provide a basis to understand the participants’ motivations for the particular ways in which they present themselves on Facebook and, more broadly, the digital experience in a Confucian communist culture that is currently being challenged by neoliberal globalizing forces.

The theorization of face by Chinese scholars provides a vantage point for understanding the concept in a Confucian culture such as Vietnam (e.g. Brunner & You, 1988; Hu, 1944; Qi, 2011). Taking the Chinese conception of face as a point of departure, Ivana (2016) sought to extend

[5]. Ivana (2016, Goffman’s (1967) theory of face-work, arguing for a more dynamic understanding

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[5] Goffman’s (1967) definition of face and face-work has an episodic characteristic in that every interaction can lead to either winning or losing face. In other words, Goffmanian face is bounded by interaction norms only.

p. 113) sought to demonstrate that the Chinese conception of face is less polarized and volatile in that face is grounded “in a series of attributes that are not directly derived from the norms of interaction”. For example, such attributes could be one’s level of education, family background, friends and community.

Through our participants’ discussion of their Facebook use, *face* was found to be central. Our participants referred to their Facebook profile as their ‘face’, their ‘personal branding’, or an ‘enhanced version of [the] self’. In Vietnamese culture and the East Asian context more broadly, face is linked to one’s “honour (*danh dự*), self-respect (*lòng tự trọng*), pride (*lòng kiêu hãnh*) and dignity (*phẩm giá, phẩm chất*), all in relation to expectations and evaluations from other people” (Nguyen & Simkin, 2015, p. 3; see also Qi, 2011). In other words, *face-work* – performed through techniques of self-presentation – can be understood as the strategies employed to ensure that images of the self, which are closely linked to one’s *face*, meet the prescribed cultural values.

Findings from the study indicate that the participants’ techniques of self-presentation on Facebook suggests that it is not simply a digital space that permits social interactions that transcend space and time, but that it also provides a means to align one’s self-image with cultural norms. The face, and the manner in which it prescribes cultural values, constrains the opportunity for young women to experiment with their self-presentations.

Performing Gender in the Process of Negotiating Identity

The participants' techniques of self-presentation on Facebook indicate an ongoing process of negotiating with a competing set of values, norms and lifestyles. This process of negotiation can be seen in the way that gender is perceived and performed by our participants.

In discussing their Facebook use, the participants desired to present an image of the *good woman* which is defined by how well they undertake their roles as a daughter, wife and/or mother who takes responsibility and contributes to the social, economic and domestic spheres of life. This finding is consistent with previous research on women in Vietnam where they are expected to fulfil the dual roles of producer – contributing financially to the family – and reproducer – performing maintenance work inside the home (Werner, 2009). This *dual role* increasingly emerged after 1986 as the country moved toward a market economy, or version of neoliberal economy (Nguyen-Vo, 2012). Since its institution, the government has encouraged citizens, especially women, to take up paid work. However, to maintain its monopoly on political power, the Vietnamese government continues to discipline women in the social and cultural realms (Nguyen-Vo, 2012). These discourses range from the moralization of female sexuality to confine it within the roles of wife and mother while demonizing prostitution and the consumption of sexually explicit material (Drummond & Rydström, 2004). Therefore, the particular version of neoliberalism promoted by the Vietnamese government allows women to develop professional/career opportunities outside the home in order to drive greater economic prosperity, however, social and personal life is still largely patriarchal (Drummond & Rydström, 2004; Higgins, 2015; Werner, 2009). The findings indicate that young urban women have embraced many aspects of consumer culture and that they wish to present an *entrepreneurial-self* in their careers and professional lives. However, they are still expected live within the norms prescribed by traditional Vietnamese values.

We observed some similarities in the way our participants perform gender on Facebook with what has been termed the *neoliberal feminist subject* in the Western context (Rottenberg, 2014). This can be seen to a degree in their presentation of a competent and positive image, along with a desire to demonstrate their ability to succeed in study, career, family, as well as to be financially independent. Based on a market logic, our participants believed that presenting a competent self is a means to resist patriarchal norms that oppress women economically, intellectually and physically, as well as to participate in modern society in which an active citizen is able to effectively compete in the market place (McGuigan, 2016). It was also perceived as a means to achieve a higher social status, to be seen as a ‘modern woman’ who is able to successfully compete like men.

Although the participants expressed a degree of empowerment in the economic sphere, they were also aware that they were responsible for maintaining the home, whether they work or not, which the majority viewed as inevitable. In relation to men, the majority of Vietnamese women continue to have greater burdens placed upon them (e.g. Teerawichitchainan, et al., 2010).

However, some of the participants felt that Vietnam had achieved gender equality or at least did not view gender relations as a problematic issue. For example, *‘I see no gender differences in this’* (Participant 1), *‘I just don’t think about gender’* (Participant 3). In discussing gender relations, Participant 3 stated that *‘since I was little, I have always tried to prove myself to be a bit masculine. Like I always try to prove that whatever men can do, I can do it as well.’*

In the past decade, the government, through state-owned media and various international forums, have claimed that gender equality has been largely achieved in Vietnam (Khuat, 2016; World Bank, 2011). These gender-neutral, gender-blind discourses, are a common feature of the being Vietnamese government's propaganda, which claims that issues of gender equality are tackled with many notable advances now achieved. Part of the problem is that discourses of economic freedom can give a sense of choice and empowerment, however, the danger is that these can make “feminism seem both second nature and unnecessary” (Baer, 2016, p. 17). Many of the so-called advances and achievements in gender equality and relations are contained in government rhetoric only as the experience of life for many Vietnamese women remains to be highly problematic (e.g. Duong, 2001; Schuler, et al., 2006).

This set of conditions can be understood through a postfeminist perspective, which begins with the intensifying of gendered expectations and labour in contemporary societies, which are reworked and rebranded under the name of agency, choice and empowerment (McRobbie, 2009). This perspective has been invoked to theorize the condition of women’s lives in western neoliberal political economies where there has been an economization of feminity (Adkins, 2018; Gill, 2008). Dosekun (2015) argues that postfeminist theory could be used as a transnational analytical tool in that it is useful for understanding the rhetoric of choice and empowerment among more privileged women in the global South, while turning a blind eye to existing systems of gender inequality. In Vietnam, many of the day-to-day conditions that women live with indicate that true liberation is still a long way off. For example, discrimination, mistreatment and violence toward women remain stubbornly high and prevalent in all strata of Vietnamese society (Rydstrøm, 2010; Vu, Schuler, Hoang, & Quach, 2014; World Bank, 2011).

Some of the participants described experiencing a dissonance as they attempted to balance the competing notions of womanhood in contemporary Vietnamese society. A number of the participants expressed concern and felt pressured to live up to such expectations. For example, Participant 2 articulated: *'It's overwhelming, indeed. It's an end that I always try to work my way toward. I think it's beneficial for me to have a career, contribute to the society as well as a loving family to take care of'*. Some participants voiced that this ideal was *'unrealistic'* and *'impossible to fulfil both at once'* (Participant 4, Participant 9). A number of other participants felt a sense of injustice when it came to gendered expectations, the division of labour in Vietnamese society, as well as general Vietnamese societal attitudes toward women. However, they indicated a reluctance to ever voice their feelings on Facebook.

Kidd (2017) analyzed the relationship between social media platforms and social inequality, concluding that users are constantly exposed to narratives that either normalize social inequality through victim blaming, distraction and titillation, or subsuming it under the idea that everyone is viewed as equal in the eyes of the global neoliberal political economic system. In line with Han's (2017, p. 61) critique of neoliberalism, we suggest that Facebook offers a platform

[3] of itself". Feminist scholar through which the "digitalized, networked subject is a panopticon

Alison Winch (2013) uses the term 'girlfriend gaze' to describe the way in which young women watch and police each other's appearance and conduct. Gill (2019) argues that while these forms of surveillance circulate across gender lines their primary target continues to be women.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to investigate the meaning that social media, in the case of this study Facebook, might have for gender relations in Vietnam. By inquiring into the way in which young women present themselves on Facebook we have sought to understand gender relations in light of new ICTs. This study found that the participants' self-presentation techniques – presenting an ideal physical appearance, competence (mastery), positive attitudes and views on life, and strategies of control – simultaneously reflect the influence of the neoliberal global economy and the Vietnamese communist government agenda. Drawing on the concepts of face and face-work (Goffman, 1959, 1967; Ivana, 2016; Qi, 2011), we suggest that face provides a vantage point to understand self-presentation and interaction on Facebook in Vietnam and other East Asian cultures.

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[3] The panopticon (meaning: *all seeing*) is a circular tower composed of individual prison cells on the outside with the guard's house positioned on the inside, which enables the guard to observe prisoners at all times. Its design means that prisoners are never aware of when they are being watched, so they are compelled to regulate their behaviors at all times. The French philosopher Michel Foucault used the panopticon metaphorically to illustrate the individual's own subjection in modern society, as they watch themselves from the position of the observer through the process of internalising the *eye* of society (Olssen, 2006).

The present study provides some insights into how notions of womanhood in the early 21st century Vietnam is been reconfigured by different cultural forces and how these can be analyzed through and influenced by social media use. The aspirational image of a beautiful woman who excels in the dual roles of producer and reproducer has come to represent a new ideal for urban women. This ideal represents an internalization of neoliberal entrepreneurial values and Vietnamese government rhetoric, both of which obscure structural gender inequalities. What is noteworthy is the resemblance between the notion of the emerging 'ideal good Vietnamese women' in Vietnam and the economization of feminity through which women's empowerment has been co-opted for the purpose of increasing economic growth as opposed to liberating women from traditional patriarchal structures. Women have been led to believe, via government rhetoric, that Vietnam has now achieved gender equity, which can be seen in its gender-blind and gender-neutral discourses along with evidence of women's greater access to health care, education and professional careers. While a number of participants expressed their discontent toward the emerging dual roles of women in our interviews, they continue to find it challenging to voice their opinions on Facebook as it might damage their *face* if it is not positively evaluated by others.

Social networking sites like Facebook provide a space for self-understanding and self-expression (Robards, 2014). However, it also has the potential to act as a space in which societal surveillance is intensified and internalized. These forms of self-surveillance place a question mark over the potential for ICTs to transform women's lives. Li and Jung (2018) write that although the popularity of social media in east Asian countries have fostered greater participation in the global public sphere, online and offline relationships in these countries are still heavily influenced by local cultural norms. This study suggests that the culturally inherited concern about *face* on Facebook can serve to intensify some of the existing social values that maintain unequal gender relations and that there is a potential for Facebook to descend into a form of digital panopticon.

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