

Article

Social Media Use and Migrants’ Intersectional Positioning: A Case Study of Vietnamese Female Migrants

Linh Le-Phuong^{1,*}, Lutgard Lams², and Rozane De Cock¹¹ Institute for Media Studies, KU Leuven, Belgium² Faculty of Arts, KU Leuven – Brussels, Belgium

* Corresponding author (le.plinh6@gmail.com)

Submitted: 29 October 2021 | Accepted: 10 February 2022 | Published: 26 May 2022

Abstract

Social media can benefit migrant communities in various ways since the sense of belonging and social inclusion have increasingly been facilitated by online participatory activity over the last decade. However, participating in social media requires not only physical thresholds such as access to internet-connected devices but also intangible assets such as linguistic skills, education, and time. As these resources are not equally available to all members of society, social media adoption differs depending on the users’ positioning. Within the intersectional framework, we explore how social circumstances influence the social media use of female migrants from Vietnam. Research on migrants’ social media use rarely focuses on migrants’ multilayers of identities and intersectionality, nor does it zoom in on different (in)voluntary migration routes within Asia (in contrast to South–North migration). Our case study focuses on two groups of Vietnamese female migrants: those who had migrated to China but returned to Vietnam; and those who married Taiwanese men and still live in Taiwan. Seventeen female migrants were interviewed about their migratory experience and social media use. Our empirical data reveal that the social media use patterns of the Vietnamese female migrants are impacted by their intersectional identities of being female, (returned) migrants of a specific social class, ethnicity, education level, and age group. Their use is steered by different motivations and often limited by social positioning but only seldom are social media used as a channel to raise public awareness or to express migration-related issues.

Keywords

female migration; intersectionality; social cohesion; social media use; Vietnam; Vietnamese migrants

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Impact of Social Media on Social Cohesion” edited by Stefan Stieglitz (University of Duisburg-Essen) and Björn Ross (University of Edinburgh).

© 2022 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

Social media can bring both advantages and disadvantages for users from diverse backgrounds all around the globe. In particular, when it concerns migrants, communication technology can provide them with new opportunities to simultaneously engage in the public spheres of the sending and the receiving countries, enforcing their sense of belonging in both places (Marlowe et al., 2017). However, varying access levels to technological devices and social media create different realities for different social groups. Lack of access means

being less informed, and subsequently, having less social power (Jakubowicz, 2007; van Dijk, 1995). Social media’s powerful reach is a double-edged sword that can enhance social cohesion and inclusion of different groups. However, it can also deepen and reinforce social inequalities, “creating an uneven landscape of access which can be influenced by economic status, literacy and education levels, language barriers and age” (Kennan et al., 2011, as cited in Marlowe et al., 2017, p. 88). However, when migrants are studied, they are often classified in rigid legal categorisations, and the wider context such as class, gender, ethnicity, and marital status

is ignored in understanding their movement (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018).

Similarly, scholarship on migrants' social media use rarely focuses on the migrants' multilayers of identities and migratory experiences that shape and inform such use. Media scholars have identified how social media use can contribute to the lives of female migrants (An et al., 2020; Wu & Phung, 2017), but as yet, studies have not focussed on how differences, such as social and economic position, gender, age, ethnicity, digital literacy, amongst migrants influence their use. How does the migrants' position in the host society foster or dissuade their social media participation? Is their migratory motivation a factor of influence? And do the migrant's gender and the gendered roles in their residing location impact their use? In sum, how do multiple identities such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, and others affect the outcome of their social media participation? Vietnamese female migrants (VFM) to East Asia present an interesting case study because of their diverse migration routes, the multifaceted dimensions of their migratory experience, and the (intra-Asia) hierarchical power relations between the host society and themselves. Anchoring in the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2011), we unpack and compare the complex identities of the VFMs, who migrated to either China or Taiwan, and analyse how their positionalities influence their social media participation and the social inclusion in their residing location. In doing so, this article contributes to the intersection of media, migration, and gender research in an understudied geographical region (Piper & Lee, 2016). We argue that social media can weaken social cohesion to a certain extent because the VFMs' varied social positionings and physical locations can limit their social media participation. At the same time, social ties in real life and the women's own agency can also counter some barriers created by social media's ecology. Obviously, the use of smartphones and social media can also facilitate migration during the journey and after the arrival at the host country to keep in touch with the home nation (Eriksen, 2020).

In our study, 17 in-depth interviews conducted with VFMs give voice to their narratives and provide insight into their choices regarding social media use. The collected data further the understanding of different migrant groups' social media adoption, i.e., the VFMs to East Asia. Additionally, the article answers Huang's (2020, p. 78) call to extend scholarship beyond the "linear and one-way migration from less developed to more developed countries" and explore female migration in the South-South pattern, which has developed significantly lately (Cheng, 2021; Grillot, 2011).

2. Female Migration from Vietnam to China and Taiwan

The VFMs in this study migrated to China and Taiwan for various voluntary and involuntary reasons, yet their experience cannot be described as just one or another

but should be understood on the spectrum of voluntariness and involuntariness. Forced and voluntary migration exists as a continuum of experience, where the "voluntariness" fluctuates, and the labelling is problematic because it cannot capture the concept comprehensively (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018). The continuum of migratory experience of the VFMs to China is illustrated through their journey: They voluntarily wish to migrate for better employment opportunities—but not for marriage purposes. Understanding this wish of many women from rural areas, especially the young and naïve, human traffickers deceive them by promising a good "clean" job in China (not involving prostitution) and later sell them to brothels or Chinese families looking for wives for their sons. The VFMs' voluntary position becomes involuntary once they find out that they will remain in China and be forced to marry or engage in sex work.

On the other hand, the VFMs to Taiwan in this study sought to migrate primarily for marriage, which for many was the result of mutual love, but for some, the legitimate ticket to improved employment prospects and economic stability. Even though these were "voluntary" decisions, many migrated to Taiwan because they had no better choice at home. Arguably, their social circumstances compelled them to marry transnationally, so some level of "involuntariness" is embedded in their "voluntariness." Thus, these two groups possess different levels of agency at different points in their migration and (re-)settlement process, continually moving on the spectrum between the passive and active, voluntary and involuntary extremes. In this study, the VFMs who went to China returned to Vietnam and underwent a different (re-)integration process than those who migrated to Taiwan. As Vijayarasa (2010) pointed out, this reintegration process is largely influenced by the Vietnamese gender norms and hegemonic discourse about female emigration, resulting in the re-stigmatisation of returnees. Both groups are VFMs, but their migration motivations differ and conflate at several points. By recognising and analysing these different kinds of subjectivities, we can avoid "attributing fixed identity groupings to the dynamic processes of positionality and location on the one hand and the contested and shifting political construction of categorical boundaries on the other" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 200). This study includes both routes to demonstrate, on the one hand, that the VFMs' projects of belonging are situated and multi-layered (Yuval-Davis, 2011) and, on the other hand, that intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) can influence each individual's social media use, according to the VFM's positioning in their specific context. As an analytical framework, intersectionality offers a comprehensive understanding of a person's identity through the combination of social, political, and cultural identities and how such amalgamation results in discrimination or privilege in a person's life. The next sections briefly describes the migration trends and contextualise the VFMs' multiple identities and the oppression dynamics that some face.

2.1. Vietnamese Female Migration to China

China ended its one-child policy in 2016 because of the social consequences it caused, namely abandonment of baby girls, gender-selective abortion, a skewed sex ratio, a growing number of bachelors, and an ageing population (Foundation Scelles, 2019; Lhomme et al., 2021). With a surplus of approximately 31.64 million men (Lhomme et al., 2021), female trafficking from South-East Asia (SEA) and Vietnam to China has become prevalent in recent decades (Foundation Scelles, 2019, p. 456; Stöckl et al., 2017). However, there is limited data because of its irregular patterns and unregistered movement. Vietnam reported 9,142 trafficked persons from 2006 to 2015 (Van Nguyen et al., 2020), and between 2008 and 2016, 8,366 trafficked persons have since returned to Vietnam (International Organization for Migration, 2016), although the real number could be much higher. An estimated 80% of trafficked cases are to China (Blue Dragon, 2021), and there are immeasurable undocumented Vietnamese marriage migrants (Su, 2013). The Chinese Xinhua News Agency indicates that there are over 100,000 VFMs married to Chinese men (Wei, 2020). Although we acknowledge that female migration to China is not always related to involuntary trafficking and can involve loving relationships, the first group of participants in this study consists of VFMs who returned to Vietnam after a forceful, unhappy migratory experience in China.

2.2. Vietnamese Female Migration to Taiwan

The success of Taiwanese family planning has brought the fertility rate down to one of the lowest birth rates in the world, about 1.2 births per woman (Worldometer, 2020). Due to the societal progress that made Taiwanese women remain single longer to strive for careers in the cities, Taiwanese men from rural areas have difficulty finding a life partner (Bélanger & Wang, 2012; Wang, 2010). Hence, Taiwan has attracted VFMs as marriage migrants through commercial matchmaking since the early 90s. “Globalisation and unequal economic development between countries are the major forces driving these international marriages” (Wu & Phung, 2017, p. 380). However, in the last decade, education and economic exchange between Vietnam and Taiwan has diversified the backgrounds of the VFMs who emigrate to Taiwan. Nowadays, Vietnamese women and Taiwanese men can meet organically in professional and educational settings, resulting in marriages of choice. The total number of VFMs in Taiwan, as of January 2021, is 155,942 (Ministry of Interior, 2021), and they remain the largest group of marriage migrants from SEA in Taiwan (Cheng, 2021). The second group of participants in this article includes VFMs who have married Taiwanese men and currently reside on the island.

2.3. Intersectionality of Vietnamese Female Migrants

Marriage migration from Vietnam to China and Taiwan is highly gendered (Bélanger & Wang, 2012; Blue Dragon, 2021; Cheng, 2021; Grillot, 2011); this female migration flow is crucially affected by gender structures, cultural systems, and national power relations between the countries: Certain Taiwanese men wish to marry women from a poorer country to feel “superior” (Bélanger & Wang, 2012) and similarly, numerous Chinese men seek wives who are submissive, docile, and obedient to maintain the gendered dynamics (Lhomme et al., 2021). Confucian tenets are deeply rooted in Vietnam (Vijayarasa, 2010); these tenets are also highly appreciated in China and Taiwan. These two destinations also attract female migrants from Vietnam because of so-called marital hypergamy (Bélanger & Wang, 2012). Since Chinese/Taiwanese men in rural areas and with few financial resources struggle to find a local spouse who is interested in marrying “up,” they resort to looking for partners from countries with lower economic power, where the “bride price” is deemed cheaper (Bélanger & Wang, 2012; Lhomme et al., 2021).

VFMs’ intersectional identities, particularly gender, class, origin, and ethnicity, construct the power structure and inequalities that determine and impact their migratory experience and their social media participation, as will be shown further. Firstly, VFM’s migratory experience is gendered because of the female deficit in China and Taiwan. The VFMs were able to migrate because of their female biological ability to perform reproductive labour and the necessary social reproduction to maintain and regenerate society, e.g., childrearing, housework, and sustaining familial and kinship ties (Constable, 2009; Piper & Lee, 2016). Secondly, intermeshed with the gender aspect, the age of the VFMs is also an important attribute since their movement was to boost population growth in the destinations. Hence, they often migrate and are only welcomed while being of childbearing age. Thirdly, their social background, which ultimately ties to class division, guides their migration motivation. Many VFMs come from less developed areas without employment prospects. Hence, migration to a wealthier country means opportunities for economic improvement. Migrating involves using resources that are not equally available to all, so in the cultural context of Vietnam, where migration for women is often related to marriage, transnational marriage migration poses a logical pathway for VFMs to go abroad. However, as “people are not scattered randomly along the different axes of power of different social divisions” but “tend to concentrate in a specific location of another one” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 200), the areas where the VFMs come from are often located in rural and mountainous terrains of Vietnam where a large number of ethnic minorities are concentrated. Here, different axes of power emerge between the two groups: For VFMs migrating to China, ethnicity presents a dimension in their social difference,

as over 60% of trafficked women in Vietnam are from ethnic groups (Blue Dragon, 2021), while these groups account for only 15% of the Vietnamese population; for VFMs migrating to Taiwan, most belong to the Kinh ethnicity (85% of the population) and often originate from southern Vietnam. The local kinship tradition of valuing both maternal and paternal sides as a social expectation acts as a driver and duty for them to migrate in search of better living conditions not only for themselves but also their family members (Tang et al., 2011). These two groups of VFMs each hold distinctive social particularities, yet both undergo forms of oppression because of gender subordination, racial hierarchy, and class division, situated within particular social norms and local belief systems. Other studies have shown that power works to suppress female migrant groups through manifestations in policies (Bonjour & de Hart, 2013; Cheng, 2021), social and legal stigmas (Huang, 2020; Vijayarasa, 2010), and female body commodification (Bélanger & Wang, 2012; Wang, 2010). The significance of intersectionality lies precisely in criticising how power works through multiple layers and affects collectivities and communities differently (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

3. Social Media Use and Social Cohesion

Social media as a form of communication plays an important role in connecting and maintaining transnational linkages in personal, familial, and professional relationships. A variety of social media platforms have burgeoned to cater to their respective customer bases and have become critical communicative technologies for individuals to feel connected and like they belong, especially amongst “migrant communities whose lives are often characterised by multi-scalar relations and attachments across multiple forms of identity” (Marlowe et al., 2017, p. 87). For people from migrant backgrounds, a sense of belonging can be forged through localised social interactions, which are increasingly online nowadays, and can enhance the social cohesion of the society to which they migrate. As the media stands guard to social power (van Dijk, 1995), with the major shift to digital communication, access to social media becomes fundamental in being heard and included in the wider society. Constructing and maintaining social cohesion becomes inherently synchronous with social media usage.

Although social media and digital communications present an exciting new reality of connectivity for migrant communities, the question of access and subsequent inclusion into the (online) society has been raised by previous research (Jakubowicz, 2007; Marlowe et al., 2017; van Dijk, 2013). Firstly, scholarship has pointed out that online communities are often based around a shared ethnicity or particular social group (An et al., 2020; Willem & Tortajada, 2021; Wu & Phung, 2017), so it is unclear whether social media can facilitate interactions beyond limited circles and create linkages that are socially cohesive within a new community. Secondly,

uneven access to digital technologies and social media resources can enhance the “digital divide” (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014) and amplify the existing social divisions within society (Marlowe et al., 2017). Various attributes such as gender, ethnicity, linguistic skills, class, and media/digital literacy can act as direct or indirect barriers to, or enhancers of, the online space for many (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Le & Nicolaisen, 2021; Marlowe et al., 2017). Thirdly, the sense of belonging generated by social media for migrants is to be understood in terms of their situated positions. All these critical questions need to be taken into account when examining the nexus of social media use and migrant communities: Several factors and overlapping identities determine the use habits of the social groups under discussion.

In the context of VFMs in Taiwan, where the quality of life is deemed better than in Vietnam and access to the internet and digital devices is extensive, it is linguistic skills that tend to present a barrier to participation in the public sphere. Apart from womanly duties of bearing and rearing children, VFMs and marriage migrants from SEA also have to spend extra time studying Mandarin in evening classes, if their husband and in-laws allow (Hsia, 2015). This might give the impression that VFMs who have returned to Vietnam from China would have an easier time reintegrating without the language barrier, but they face a different kind of dilemma. Social stigma equates the migration of women with prostitution (Vijayarasa, 2010), making it difficult for them to return to their place of origin. Some VFMs are denied membership of the local community because they are believed to have “prostituted themselves” in China (Ng et al., 2021). Furthermore, as social media adoption and meaningful use are deeply class-based in Vietnam, most citizens present in this online space are younger, educated urbanites (Le & Nicolaisen, 2021), in contrast to many VFMs who come from rural areas with less education. Thus, understanding the VFMs’ adoption of social media requires one to appreciate their gendered, racialised, and classed social relations of their specific positions.

4. Method

We conducted qualitative in-depth interviews to gain insights into the VFMs’ social media use and the factors that influence their frequency of use. Seventeen Vietnamese women agreed to participate: 12 VFMs residing in Taiwan and 5 in Vietnam. The discrepancy between the two groups is due to the difficulty of accessing the VFMs to China, as their migratory experience had been traumatic and the NGO that cooperated with the study could only provide a limited number of contacts, those they deemed stable enough to be interviewed. We acknowledge that the choice of this particular NGO, one which assists returnees, may have influenced the profile of the participants for this study; however, this was the most appropriate way to conduct the research since the NGO acted as an extra screening layer to

minimise distress for participants. Empirical data for this group is extremely limited and difficult to gain access to (see also Stöckl et al., 2017), hence the limited sample size. However, the data is rich: The women from both groups have diverse backgrounds and were different in age, socio-economic situation, employment status, and education level (Tables 1 and 2).

All interviews were conducted by Linh Le-Phuong, who is a native speaker of Vietnamese. The phone and face-to-face interviews lasted between one and a half to six hours, where five VFMs in Taiwan invited the interviewer to stay longer at their restaurant/home to allow the interview to be held while the interviewee was working. The participants' daily activities were observed, and toward the end of the interviews, once trust was built, the answers became more extensive. Before interviewing the participants, the interviewer also "added" them as "friends" on their respective social media platform to develop a positive relationship necessary for trust-building (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

The VFMs to China were recruited through an NGO in Vietnam that worked with survivors of trafficking. The VFMs to Taiwan were recruited through the existing social network of Linh Le-Phuong: Once a key gatekeeper participant was identified, the rest of the sample was selected using snowball sampling. Five cities in Taiwan (Kaohsiung, Taichung, Taipei, Tainan, and Taoyuan—

cities with a relatively high number of marriage migrants) and one city in Vietnam (Hanoi) were selected for the interviews between October 2019 and February 2020. The Ethics Committee of KU Leuven University approved the study's ethical protocol on 4 October 2019 (Dossier No. G-2019 09 1749).

The interviews were semi-structured with generic and specific questions. Before asking about the VFM's experience with social media, the author asked about their background and migration journeys. The next part concentrated on the current situations and VFM's future aspirations. These two parts acted as a "warm-up" section before the questions about their social media use. Finally, the participants were asked to describe any issues they might have had when participating in social media and if such platform(s) could be the space for them to voice collectively as a community of (returned) female migrants. Because the women's own narratives were essential, we examined their understanding of the topic and the reasoning behind their actions. A compensation of VND 500,000 (20 euros) was offered in appreciation of each participant's time and effort. This was not revealed before the interviews to avoid it being the sole motivation for participation which may have resulted in biased answers.

The method deployed takes both characteristics of thematic analysis (Fugard & Potts, 2019) and grounded

Table 1. Basic socio-economic information of the VFMs to Taiwan (n = 12).

Age	25–40	4	
	Over 40	8	
Ethnicity	Kinh (majority of Vietnamese)	12	
Employment Status	Support husband's family business	1	Only one without an outside job; six support husbands' businesses while working
	White-collar job	7	
	Blue-collar job	4	
Education	Did not finish high school	2	
	High school	4	
	Bachelor degree	5	
	Master's degree	1	

Table 2. Basic socio-economic information of the VFMs to China (n = 5).

Age	25–30	4	
	Over 30	1	
Ethnicity	Kinh	3	
	Other	2	
Employment Status	Self-employed	3	Combined with pregnancy and childcare
	White-collar job	1	
	Blue-collar job	1	
Education	Did not finish secondary school	1	
	High school	3	
	Bachelor degree	1	

theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). As an inductive method, grounded theory prevents preconceptions and allows room for new information and insight, while thematic analysis can “provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). While the data collection and transcriptions were going on, thematic analysis was applied to locate the general themes within the answers. Following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phases of thematic analysis (familiarisation with data during the transcribing, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report), over 500 pages of transcriptions were coded line by line and categorised into a set of themes and sub-themes. After three rounds of coding informed by the theoretical concepts of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2011) and social cohesion (Jakubowicz, 2007), the most relevant themes were generated and analysed.

5. Findings

Our findings show that all the VFMs use different social media platforms with a range of frequencies and diverse goals. The selected platforms are specific to their locations, i.e., VFMs in Vietnam use a local version of Facebook called Zalo while VFMs in Taiwan use LINE, a popular Taiwanese social networking app. Both groups use Facebook and other platforms, such as Instagram, WeChat, Viber, and YouTube, which tend to be less popular among these participants. To protect the participants’ privacy, we use pseudonyms throughout this article, and all quotes have been translated from Vietnamese to English by Linh Le-Phuong. Table 3 details the social context of the interviewees referred to in this article.

Our analysis reveals two emerging patterns relating to social media use amongst the VFMs that are influenced by their intersectional identities of being female, (returned) migrants of a specific social class, ethnicity, education level, and age group. The VFMs all use social media for different purposes but seldom as a channel to

express opinions and sentiments about perceived injustices or opportunities to a wider public.

5.1. Minimum and Reduced Use of Social Media and Reasons Behind Limited Use

Using social media requires various resources which are not equally available to all the VFMs, and many factors can reduce their ability to use social media in a meaningful way, i.e., for voicing migration-related issues they may encounter in their daily lives and/or being included in the larger communities at their place of residence. One resource that seems to be particularly scarce for the VFMs of both groups is time. All of the participants in the study are employed, one way or another, to different degrees: Many VFMs in Taiwan also provide support for their husband’s family businesses while sustaining their own jobs, and those in Vietnam combine freelance work with childcare and maternity leave.

Anh-Lan is a mother of two who works on an ad-hoc basis as a Vietnamese language teacher and an interpreter in a Taiwanese court, but she also helps at her husband’s restaurant in a bustling central district of Taipei. Contact with Anh-Lan prior to the interview was rushed and patchy due to her busy schedule. During the interview, Anh-Lan had no problems sharing her perspectives about her social media use, which, as she described it, was limited to the minimum:

I don’t have anything updated on my Facebook. I have it mainly to keep my friends’ contacts and be reminded of their birthdays [laugh]. It’s useful that way, like a phonebook with notes...Very rarely I would post something, but just for people to know that I am still using this Facebook.

Anh-Lan adds that she is the primary caretaker of the two sons, and without explicitly mentioning gendered responsibility as a wife and mother, she explains her position as follows:

Table 3. Social background of participants referred to in this article.

	Age	Children	Working for Husband’s Business	Employed	Location
VFMs to China					
Le-Tham	32	1	No	Full-time	Small city
Kieu-Ly	26	1	No	Freelance	Small city
Khuy-Cai	29	1	No	Ad-hoc basis	Rural area
VFMs to Taiwan					
Hai-Ly	42	2	No	Full-time	Taipei City
Anh-Lan	36	2	Yes	Ad-hoc basis	Taipei City
Hai-Van	36	3	Yes	No	Taichung City
Tran-Mac	45	2	Yes	Full-time	Taichung City
Tao-Loan	42	2	No	Full-time	Taoyuan City
Hang-Nga	30	0	No	Freelance	Taipei City

I can never take a full-time job because I need to care for the boys. Do you know how many rides to school and extra activities per week there are? And all the cooking and housework, and the shop. The kids don't see me so much in a day, so I prefer not to be on my phone when they are around. So, tell me, where do I find the time to be online?

Unlike Anh-Lan, who works outside of home sometimes, Hai-Van only works for her husband's logistics business at home. She is the primary carer for three children and her parents-in-law, who live close by. Hai-Van's husband prefers that she work at home so she can easily manage domestic tasks. Both Lan-Anh and Hai-Van met their husbands organically, married and migrated of their own free will, yet the expectation to perform reproductive labour as a woman (Constable, 2009; Piper & Lee, 2016) remains in their cases. As well as time constraints, Hai-Van also feels her language skills and origin make her less able to fully participate on social media. She explains and compares her position when speaking and writing Chinese:

When a white person from the US or the UK makes a grammar mistake and speaks with an accent, people here say "Oh, that's cute." When we [VFMs] make the same mistake, the locals show a cynical attitude and say that "It's incorrect, it's funny."

Amplifying the discourse about VFMs in Taiwan, Hai-Van's story reveals a clear social hierarchy in this society where whites are considered "superior others" (Lan, 2011) and marriage migrants, especially the ones from the "third world," are inferior (Bélanger & Wang, 2012). Hai-Van mainly uses social media for news updates from friends and family back in Vietnam. According to her, there is little need to be updated about her Taiwanese circles because her closed domestic situation does not foster many external relationships. Her usage reflects the domestic nature of her everyday life.

Another participant, Hai-Ly, whose marriage was a "love marriage" in her words, works as a reporter for the Vietnamese community in a large radio station in Taipei. Hai-Ly's job allows her to be flexible with childcare, as long as she has the recordings ready for airtime. She is a well-known figure in the Vietnamese community in Taiwan. As affluent as Hai-Ly might be, she still thinks that her linguistic skills are looked down upon by locals:

Our accent and "mouth position" are different from the Taiwanese. I have been here more than 20 years, and they still point it out when I speak. So, I am more confident using social media in Vietnamese. I still post in Chinese though, just not as often.

The language barrier, associated with origin and nation, does recede for some VFMs who have returned to Vietnam. However, for others, the problem of time, inter-

twined with social class, is more prominent. After almost two years in China, Le-Tham escaped to Vietnam from the brothel into which she had been sold. Due to the social stigma that associates VFMs with women who have taken up prostitution by choice, she first went to the shelter in Hanoi to distance herself from "vulgar comments by neighbours" and later moved to work in a factory a few hours from home:

I work a 12-hour shift every day. After coming home, I can only have a shower and sleep. I have no time to surf Face[book]....At the textile factory, we have only Sunday off, when there are a lot of orders, and then we continue working without a day off. Twelve hours a day for the whole month or more....They already allocated the work for the factory staff; I can't take a day off. I have to work.

Le-Tham's extended working hours is the reality lived by thousands of garment factory workers in Vietnam who supply the global fast fashion chain. With such a schedule, she has no time to consume media products of any kind. As she works in a different town, she prefers spending her free time video calling her teenage daughter who lives in her natal village, where she cannot stay because of the "malicious rumours." Le-Tham's poor background was the reason that compelled her to migrate for better employment: "I was young and naïve, suffering from bereavement of my late husband who had passed away just 10 days before my journey," so she was deceived, drugged, and sold to a brothel. She speaks of the "lost years" in China where she could not generate any income for herself or her family and is now determined to work harder to make up for her daughter's lack of material means. The "time" factor often came up in the accounts of many participants. A participant, Y-Loan invited the interviewer to her food shop in Taoyuan for the interview after lunchtime, or "peak hours" as she described it. Despite this, during the interview, she was continuously having to prepare the food for the dinner shift and was cleaning the shop while answering. Similarly, during a video call interview, Khuy-Cai, a Tay ethnic who was made to wed a Chinese man against her will but managed to run away, did all the following: She fed her two-year-old daughter, put her to sleep, collected and chopped wood, and brought the wood to the house:

If I don't do this when she sleeps, I have no other time....My husband works far away; I am a mum and a dad at the same time. If I don't work one day, we don't eat the next day. So, I prioritise time for work, childcare, and if any time is left, maybe some time on Face[book].

The minimum or reduced media usage is not necessarily limited to the lack of financial resources, as shown in the cases of VFMs to Taiwan, whose economic situations are fairly comfortable. Their gendered responsibilities

(limiting their time) and racial hierarchy situated in the intra-Asian power relations (as visible, for example, through differences in linguistic skills at speaking standard Mandarin) may all hinder their social media use. Nonetheless, financial means which links to social class and time availability of the VFMs to China presents a prominent obstacle for them to participate online. For them, time is “the money that buys my daughter’s milk” (Khuy-Cai); hence, it should not be wasted on social platforms.

5.2. Moderate to Frequent Use of Social Media and Economic Reasons Behind It

Our findings suggest that social media platforms are used more frequently by the interviewees if it is for entrepreneurial purposes. However, this type of usage requires more than just basic digital knowledge. For instance, if a certain platform is used to sell goods, a basic understanding of algorithms and keyword search is crucial to maintain and boost sales. Attaining such knowledge requires time, money, and effort, or in some cases, financial resources if it implies hiring others. As a founder of an organisation in Taiwan supporting marriage migrants in finding jobs, dealing with domestic violence, and learning Chinese, Tran-Mac is a well-respected figure in the community:

I use Facebook to post information for the foreign marriage migrant community. But to be honest, my assistant helps me a lot with the “fan page” of the organisation. I barely do any hands-on things with the Facebook page; I’m often preoccupied with other matters that keep the organisation growing, like giving talks or interviews like this.

Having a Facebook fan page for her organisation, Tran-Mac also uses her personal accounts (Facebook, LINE) to highlight immigration regulations and share information with the community. She earns her salary from the organisation and the Taiwanese governmental funding, which endorses immigrant spouses. An Hoa-ethnic from Vietnam, Tran-Mac already spoke Chinese before entering Taiwan, bolstering her participation in the public sphere. However, this was not without difficulty at first. Because of Tran-Mac’s Chinese proficiency, police routinely asked her to be an informal interpreter for VFMs who could not speak the language. Yet her abusive ex-husband did not let her use a telephone and forbade her to work since he feared that she would run away, a common stereotype about VFMs (Tang et al., 2011). Receiving countless beatings and seeing other VFMs in the same position, Tran-Mac started her organisation and later a political party for female foreign migrants after her divorce. The fact that Tran-Mac was prevented from accessing a phone and social media can thus be traced back to her position as a woman whose physical stature meant that her ex-husband could

overpower her. He felt such entitlement to control her physically because, in Tran-Mac’s words, “he bought me for \$4,000.” Sharing a similar situation with Tran-Mac, Tao-Loan was forbidden to watch TV by her late-husband in fear that she would learn Chinese and run away: “I was so young and small. Less than 40 kilograms, can you believe it? Now I am an elephant [laugh]. He couldn’t beat me now.”

Tao-Loan now has her own duck noodles shop and uses Facebook to promote her business after her late husband died in a car accident while intoxicated. Tao-Loan describes the many hurdles to access Facebook:

Without language, you are really confounded. OK, I had a phone, but no internet. To get data, you need to have a contract, which requires your ID, which he kept away from me. Also, you need money to buy the contract, where do I find the money? The two daughters were my full-time job: many problems, no solution.

Tao-Loan married and migrated to lift her birth family out of poverty. She still regretted not being able to send money back home during her first few years in Taiwan. “Filial piety,” a tenet of Confucianism, requiring children to take good care of their parents, compelled Tao-Loan to migrate. Therefore, she was more concerned about remittance than setting up an internet contract to get on social media.

Having had a traumatic experience in China, Kieu-Ly considers herself lucky because a police officer decided to engage in a relationship with her despite his knowledge of her past. This is significant because of the overwhelming legal discourse regarding returnees as “socially evil” people who get involved in sex work (Vijayarasa, 2010). Kieu-Ly states that she enjoys makeup and hairdo. In her words, “beauty makes your husband love you,” and she tries to stay beautiful “for him,” to keep him around. The financial support he provided was critical, allowing her to take the time to learn about e-commerce and start her business on social media:

Zalo and Facebook are the main channels that I use to promote my products and also where the orders come in. It took me some time to build the business and learn the tricks of the trade when running advertisements on these platforms. I was dependent on my husband when the business started, but now I am confident I can make enough money for all the household bills.

Kieu-Ly’s strategic navigation to make the best out of her situation as a young woman allows her to stand on her own feet. During the video call interview, she breastfed her young daughter and answered queries from customers online. Yet, when it concerns using social media for both activist reasons and employment

opportunities, the most frequent user is Hang-Nga. She has a YouTube channel with a significant number of subscribers (240,000, as of October 2021), and she also works as a freelance MC for various Taiwanese shows. On her YouTube channel, Hang-Nga makes videos about her daily life in Taiwan and interviews other VFMs about their lifestyles. Inspired by her mother's migration to Taiwan, she started a YouTube channel to introduce a different outlook of VFMs to the Taiwanese public; she attracted so much attention that it became possible to monetise the content. Hang-Nga's content also became popular among the Vietnamese audience and is subtitled in both languages. However, her circumstances are different from other VFMs: Hang-Nga came to Taiwan to study at university through the support of her mother as a domestic worker in Taipei. This sets her apart from other participants who did not finish high school or had to learn Chinese on top of their wifely duties as a spouse. Hang-Nga's younger age and freer schedule allow her to familiarise herself with the latest social media trends to produce engaging content. Additionally, Hang-Nga's husband is a cameraman, thus her videos often come with nice effects and correct lighting. Hang-Nga's advantages are education- and class-based compared to other VFMs, which influences her frequent engagement with social media: "I accredit my success to my mother's migration and hard work, without which I would still remain a countryside girl in the rural village where we come from."

Hang-Nga's case portrays a clear contrasting picture of how social context can enhance one's social media use, from one generation to the next. If her mother had not become a labour migrant, Hang-Nga would not have been able to reach a social class that gave her the privilege of time, language skills, higher education, flexible yet stable employment, and subsequently the frequent engagement on social media to bridge the VFMs with the Taiwanese society.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Returning to van Dijck's (2013) work, "a culture of connectivity" is becoming more dominant and social media is essential to engage socially both online and offline. With its entry threshold lowering all the time, social media is deemed to have the potential to build social cohesion through the inclusion of individuals and intergroups within society (Jakubowicz, 2007; Marlowe et al., 2017). However, the cases in this study reveal that the social media use of VFMs is situated and enhanced or constrained by their various dimensions of difference. As demonstrated, for some of the VFMs interviewed, their identities can limit social media participation to some extent because of the expectation that they perform gendered responsibilities (Constable, 2009; Piper & Lee, 2016), which reduces time to be online. When they work and appear to be independent, many VFMs choose to work in a way that gives them flexibility so they can be readily available to fulfil duties associated with

their female identity. This finding supports the work of Villares-Varela (2018), in which she found that migrant women become entrepreneurs to advance their spouses' careers while "conforming to class-based norms of femininity" (Villares-Varela, 2018, p. 109). Additionally, being physically smaller and easily overpowered also reduces their access to resources that enable them to be on social media. Moreover, racial origin puts them in an inferior position (Lan, 2011; Tang et al., 2011) and subdues their sense of self when they face ridicule because of their perceived accent, which leads to them using digital platforms less often. When linguistic skills are not the issue, in most cases, social class restricts VFMs' available time to be online due to the intensive working schedule that is needed to support a family. This result reflects those of Bonjour and Chauvin (2018), who contended that class can greatly influence (post-)migrants' everyday practices through its intersection with different aspects such as ethnicity and race. In the same way that the VFMs' migratory experience is gendered, racialised, class-, and age-based, their adoption of social media also reflects these social imprints. That is not to say these co-constituted categories can limit the VFMs to participate online and cohere with the communities where they reside without their agency. In multiple instances, we show that some of the migrant women interviewed actually use their positioning to negotiate their social media use that benefits not only themselves but also the VFMs' community and their families. Tran-Mac's use of the Taiwanese government's funding to sustain her organisation and hire an assistant to boost their visibility is a strategy that makes the most out of her circumstances. This finding particularly echoes the results from Cheng's (2021) article on how Vietnamese immigrant activists navigate and utilise the available funding for the endorsement of SEA cultures to support and empower their community. As migrants or even children of migrants and ex-migrants, some VFMs find ways to construct their identities online in their own definitions and are even able to benefit financially from these online engagements. As social media platforms develop and extend their influence from online to offline space, the VFMs, as users, "negotiate" whether and how to appropriate them in their quotidian habits" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 6).

Anchored in Yuval-Davis's (2011) and Crenshaw's (1991) studies on intersectionality, this article argues that different identities, such as gender, race, ethnicity, social class, and age, can both enhance and weaken an individual's position within society and influence the relative use of social media. Some participants (three in this article), while bound by certain social, cultural, and historical contexts, were able to overcome the digital divide to use social media to their best interests and also that of those around them. In analysing the participants' adoption of social media, we recognise that additional intersections can affect the VFMs' life, migration, and social media use outcomes, such as relationship status, digital

literacy, and religion. Nevertheless, we focus on the dimensions of difference that are most pertinent to the article's argument to reduce analytical complexity while simultaneously attaining interesting insights. We encourage researchers to include these extra dimensions in future research on VFMs and migrants in general to provide a richer understanding of their social media use.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful for the women who participated in the study and thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- An, S., Lim, S. S., & Lee, H. (2020). Marriage migrants' use of social media. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 30(2), 83–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2020.1725073>
- Bélangier, D., & Wang, H.-Z. (2012). Transnationalism from below: Evidence from Vietnam-Taiwan cross-border marriages. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 21(3), 291–316. <https://doi.org/10.1177/011719681202100302>
- Blue Dragon. (2021). *Human trafficking & traffickers in Vietnam*.
- Bonjour, S., & Chauvin, S. (2018). Social class, migration policy and migrant strategies: An introduction. *International Migration*, 56(4), 5–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12469>
- Bonjour, S., & de Hart, B. (2013). A proper wife, a proper marriage: Constructions of “us” and “them” in Dutch family migration policy. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 20(1), 61–76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506812456459>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Cheng, I. (2021). Motherhood, empowerment and contestation: The act of citizenship of Vietnamese immigrant activists in the realm of the new southbound policy. *Citizenship Studies*, 25(7), 975–992. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2021.1968688>
- Constable, N. (2009). The commodification of intimacy: Marriage, sex, and reproductive labor. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 38, 49–64. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.37.081407.085133>
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Dekker, R., & Engbersen, G. (2014). How social media transform migrant networks and facilitate migration. *Global Networks*, 14(4), 401–418. <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12040>
- DiCicco-Bloom, B., & Crabtree, B. F. (2006). The qualitative research interview. *Medical Education*, 40(4), 314–321. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2929.2006.02418.x>
- Erdal, M. B., & Oeppen, C. (2018). Forced to leave? The discursive and analytical significance of describing migration as forced and voluntary. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(6), 981–998. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384149>
- Eriksen, T. H. (2020). Filling the apps: The smartphone, time and the refugee. In C. M. Jacobsen, M.-A. Karlsen, & S. Khosravi (Eds.), *Waiting and the temporalities of irregular migration* (pp. 58–72). Routledge.
- Foundation Scelles. (2019). *Sexual exploitation: New challenges, new answers* (Report No. 5).
- Fugard, A., & Potts, H. W. W. (2019). Thematic analysis. In P. Atkinson, S. Delamont, A. Cernat, J. W. Sakshaug, & R. A. Williams (Eds.), *SAGE research methods foundations*. SAGE.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (2017). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Routledge.
- Grillot, C. (2011). Between bitterness and sweetness, when bodies say it all: Chinese perspectives on Vietnamese women in a border space. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 7(1), 106–148.
- Hsia, H.-C. (2015). Action research with marginalised immigrants' coming to voice: Twenty years of social movement support in Taiwan and still going. In H. Bradbury (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of action research* (3rd ed., pp. 315–324). SAGE.
- Huang, P. (2020). The making of a modern self: Vietnamese women experiencing transnational mobility at the China-Vietnam border. *Social Inclusion*, 8(2), 77–85. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v8i2.2652>
- International Organization for Migration. (2016). Vietnam migration data & reports. <https://vietnam.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1396/files/documents/Trafficking.pdf>
- Jakubowicz, A. (2007). The media and social cohesion. In J. Jupp, J. Niewenhuysen, & E. Dawson (Eds.), *Social cohesion in Australia* (pp. 158–169). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511481574.015>
- Lan, P.-C. (2011). White privilege, language capital and cultural ghettoisation: Western high-skilled migrants in Taiwan. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 37(10), 1669–1693. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2011.613337>
- Le, M., & Nicolaisen, F. (2021). Conflicted citizenship in Vietnam: Between grassroots mobilization and state repression. In J. Gillen, L. C. Kelley, & L. H. Phan (Eds.), *Vietnam at the vanguard: New perspectives across time, space, and community* (pp. 33–51). Springer.
- Lhomme, L., Zhong, S., & Du, B. (2021). Demi bride traf-

- ficking: A unique trend of human trafficking from South-East Asia to China. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(3), 28–39.
- Marlowe, J. M., Bartley, A., & Collins, F. (2017). Digital belongings: The intersections of social cohesion, connectivity and digital media. *Ethnicities*, 17(1), 85–102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796816654174>
- Ministry of Interior. (2021). *Monthly bulletin of interior statistics*. https://ws.moi.gov.tw/001/Upload/400/relfile/0/4413/79c158fd-d51f-4061-b24b-fbcdb0fb92d9/month/month_en.html
- Ng, D., Rivai, I., & Chi, M. (2021, January 25). Raped, beaten and sold in China: Vietnam's kidnapped young brides. *CNA*. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/cnainsider/vietnam-kidnapped-brides-trafficking-china-wives-11777162>
- Piper, N., & Lee, S. (2016). Marriage migration, migrant precarity, and social reproduction in Asia: An overview. *Critical Asian Studies*, 48(4), 473–493. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2016.1226598>
- Stöckl, H., Kiss, L., Koehler, J., Dong, D. T., & Zimmerman, C. (2017). Trafficking of Vietnamese women and girls for marriage in China. *Global Health Research and Policy*, 2(1), Article 28. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41256-017-0049-4>
- Su, L. (2013). *Cross-border marriage migration of Vietnamese women to China* [Master's thesis, Kansas State University]. CORE. <https://core.ac.uk/reader/10653534>
- Tang, W. A., Bélanger, D., & Wang, H.-Z. (2011). Politics of negotiation between Vietnamese wives and Taiwanese husbands. In T. W. Ngo & H. Wang (Eds.), *Politics of difference in Taiwan* (pp. 134–151). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203816561>
- van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford University Press.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1995). Power and the news media. In T. A. van Dijk (Ed.), *Political communication in action* (pp. 9–36). Hampton Press.
- Van Nguyen, D., Nguyen, H. C., Le, T. Q., & Do, T. D. (2020). Human trafficking in Vietnam: The issues and responses of the Vietnamese government. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, 13(7), 135–152.
- Vijayarasa, R. (2010). The state, the family and language of “social evils”: Re-stigmatising victims of trafficking in Vietnam. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 12(Suppl. 1), 89–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691050903359257>
- Villares-Varela, M. (2018). Negotiating class, femininity and career: Latin American migrant women entrepreneurs in Spain. *International Migration*, 56(4), 109–124. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12361>
- Wang, Y.-H. (2010). From “farming daughters” to “virgin brides”: Representation of Vietnamese immigrant wives in Taiwan. *Gender, Technology and Development*, 14(2), 217–239. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097185241001400205>
- Wei, L. (2020, January 18). Commentary: Vietnamese brides increasingly the choice for China's bachelors. *Channel News Asia*. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/vietnamese-brides-for-single-men-in-china-marriage-brokers-12271868>
- Willem, C., & Tortajada, I. (2021). Gender, voice and online space: Expressions of feminism on social media in Spain. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 62–71. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i2.3851>
- Worldometer. (2020). Taiwan demographics 2020 (population, age, sex, trends). <https://www.worldometers.info/demographics/taiwan-demographics>
- Wu, C. H.-J., & Phung, T.-B. (2017). The antecedents of intention to use Facebook: The case of female foreign spouses' community in Taiwan. *International Journal of Web Based Communities*, 13(3), 379–399. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJWBC.2017.086593>
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Intersectionality and feminist politics. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13(3), 193–209. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506806065752>
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2011). *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*. SAGE.

About the Authors



Linh Le-Phuong is a PhD candidate at the Institute for Media Studies at KU Leuven University in Belgium. She studies the media representation of female migrants, its impact on society, and the protagonists themselves. Her regional focuses are Vietnam and East Asia. Her research interests include media systems, intersectional feminism, journalism practices, and social in/exclusion.



Lutgard Lams teaches media discourse analysis and intercultural communication at the Faculty of Arts of the KU Leuven, Brussels campus. Her research interests include the pragmatics of language and ideology in the media, official and media discourses in and about China/Taiwan, identity politics and nation-building in the Chinese region, and media framing of the self/other (related to regional or global issues such as migration, climate change, or international conflict).



Rozane De Cock is an associate professor in communication sciences and journalism studies at the Institute for Media Studies at KU Leuven (Belgium). Since 2013, Rozane has been director of the Brussels Center for Journalism Studies (BCJS, KU Leuven, Brussels campus). In her research, she studies news production, news reception, and news effects, including media representation of refugees and minorities. In another research track, she focuses on the convergence of gaming and gambling.