

Domestic Work Influencers in Vietnam:

The Commodification of a Labour Taken for Granted

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Following the 1986 reforms, Vietnam's economy grew rapidly, driven largely due to women's participation in its factory labour force. However, this empowerment also came with a domestic double burden. Today, because of new technology, factory workers, majority of which are women, turn to social media to subsidise their income, using domestic and care work as the videos' subject. The content of four southern Vietnamese factory worker TikTok influencers was analysed using Ethics of Care as the theoretical framework and Critical Discourse Analysis. This research sought to understand how, given the influencers' positionality, their digital portrayal of domestic and care work reinforces or challenges the current gender norms, as well as how this commodification affects the portrayal of said labour. The results revealed a slow shift towards changing gendered norms within the social circle of southern Vietnamese factory worker influencers, showing a slow move towards a new masculinity. However, the findings also show that women, whether working in this sector or not, are still performing majority of the work. Additionally, despite the work being broadcast online, tied to monetary incentive and thus performative, the effects on care recipients are not nullified, and have potential to influence future generations.

Keywords: Care Work, Domestic Work, Gendered Work, Social Media, Ethics of Care, Commodification

Editor's note: All Non-English characters in this article have been transliterated into English characters due to formatting issues.

During and after the 1986 “Doi Moi” (“renovation”) reforms, Vietnam transformed from one of the poorest countries in the world into a middle-income country, and while the economic growth we see today is not as strong as in the first two decades after these reforms, it continues to grow at a steady pace (Rama, 2023:131). One of the more known strategies employed within the country was to increase the efficiency and workload of various industries, namely, electricity, textile, and garment (Pincus, 2023:172). Considering these types of industries typically employ women (Green, 1996:413), it also meant a step towards women’s economic emancipation and financial independence. On top of that, due to the gendered norms and domestic labour distribution, it also meant a double, or even triple burden for women (Duong et al, 2024:894) where there is both an expectation to work and contribute to the labour force as well as retain their domestic tasks.

Recently, a new trend in Vietnam emerged: social media videos by factory workers portraying domestic life and chores. These videos commodify the domestic work tasks portrayed and monetise them, either directly from the viewership or other activities such as advertisement of products or of personal merchandise sold through their social media channel. The research carried out aims to address whether the portrayal of this work specifically creates a cycle of gendered domestic and care work becoming more and more undervalued, or if it adds a new element that could lead to further independence and even societal gender norms change. This paper aims to understand and answer the main

research question:

How does the digital portrayal of care work by Vietnamese light industry factory worker TikTok influencers reinforce or challenge gender roles in contemporary Vietnam?

Care and Domestic Labour as a Commodity

The commodification of domestic and care work under global capitalism has been widely theorised, with scholars such as Marx (de Paul, 2023) and Harvey (2003) framing it as a process of transforming human labour into goods, often through mechanisms such as accumulation by dispossession. Within the context of Vietnam, the 1986 economic reforms marked a key shift towards reshaping gendered labour roles and domestic expectations (Horat, 2018). While there are cases as in the example of Ninh Hiep village (Ibid. 60), where a shift from agricultural work to trade left many men engaging more in household tasks, there still remained a patriarchal structure. This structure ended up reinforcing the already present Confucian ideals and cultural constructs such as the Vietnam specific ‘thien chuc nguoi me’ (translated as “heaven-ordained duties of motherhood”) (Duong et al, 2024:896) which consolidates women as mothers and glorifies their ‘natural capacities’ towards care and domestic work (Hoang, 2016 cited in Horat, 2018:58).

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the gendered double burden of care, with women disproportionately being affected both physically and mentally (UN Women, 2020:502). McClelland and

Sliwa (2023) highlight the persistence of disparity and invisibility in domestic labour, introducing the Gendered Domestic Affordance Perception (GDAP). The GDAP explains how environmental cues are perceived and interpreted differently depending on gender, with women more readily perceiving tasks as requiring action, such as a place being too dirty and needing to be cleaned. These dynamics are largely created by cultural norms which further push women into lower-paid, care-focused roles, or even push women out of formal employment (Ibid. 503). Factory work, particularly Vietnam's garment sector, offers conditional empowerment for women with employment challenging domestic labour distribution. However, women remain constrained by patriarchy and wage disparity (Duong et al. 2024).

Ethics of Care and Care Work

This study drew on the Ethics of Care theoretical framework, primarily developed by Carol Gilligan and later expanded upon by Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto. Gilligan's model largely dealt with moral orientation and was grounded in relationships and empathy as opposed to more justice-based models. Fisher and Tronto's expansion then insists that justice must include care as opposed to being seen as its opposite, implying that societies must recognise care as a shared civic responsibility as opposed to it being delegated to women as a private and gendered duty. This makes the moral act one of performing care work, by everyone.

Care and care work as is discussed and mentioned in this article is meant to encompass all forms of care in line with Fisher and Tronto's definition and concept of "care" as a manner in which people "maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Fisher and Tronto, 1990:40, in Keller and Kittay, 2017: 545).

The term "care" and the term of "care work" (as far as the larger theoretical concept) then seems to refer to: the combination of both care work as a labour for people (as in the case of childbearing)

and domestic work (such as cooking, cleaning, sweeping, etc.). This also includes self-care practices, which in line with Fisher and Tronto's definition therefore exist in both care work and domestic work.

The Influencers in Question

The study adopted a qualitative research design, employing a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically Fairclough's three-dimensional model. This framework examines the relationship between textual features, discursive practices, and socio-cultural contexts (Fairclough, 2013:89; Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002:63). CDA is then adapted to visual media, with TikTok videos being treated as the "text" that communicates meaning through visual cues (Durmaz & Yogun, 2022:27).

Initially, over 20 influencers were found using the keyword "cuoc song song nhan" ("worker's life"). These were factory workers or influencers that have shown themselves to be working within factories. This number was then reduced to people living in "tro" (a type of boarding house) which the author was able to recognise from the videos through the distinctive appearance of said accommodations. Following this, a last selection process took place, where the author had to have confirmed that the influencers were in fact employed in the light industry at the time of the research taking place and not simply made a few videos in that environment or employed in a different sector. Following this selection process, four influencers were selected:

- *Lan*: A woman working in food manufacturing, featured with her husband and child.
- *Hoa and Phuong*: Two women working in leather tanning and hiding manufacturing.
- *Thu*: A cooking content creator woman employed in fan manufacturing.
- *Nam*: The only male influencer, working in garment production.

All four of these influencers were additionally found out to have lived in the Greater Ho Chi Minh

and the Mekong Delta areas (two in each area), making this study focused on South Vietnamese light industry factory workers. The age or the socioeconomic background of these people was not available. However, their employment within these factories can shed light on what type of living experiences other people employed within these positions might face, as well as what the potential struggles or expectations in their lives with regards to care work are.

The videos of these four influencers were recorded in 2024, with the two months of October and November selected to avoid seasonal interruptions or influences such as the lunar new year or summer holidays. Then analysed for recurring acts and behaviours related to care work. While the content revolves around various domestic and care work tasks, only key noteworthy moments from these videos are discussed to illustrate the main points.

The author tried to reach out to the influencers via the social media's direct messaging feature but was not met with responses. Therefore, the author was unable to acquire formal consent to collect and analyse the data. While this content is publicly available, the author made sure not to mention or include any identifying markers or visuals.

The Findings

The findings show a shift in some gender roles within care work, however, as far as what is broadcast most, these tasks are still predominantly done by women by virtue of there being more female influencer. This therefore shows that existing gendered norms within care work distribution still exist, at least in terms of what is made visible and watched on the platform.

The structural gender norms within Vietnam and the economic realities of these factory workers lead to a visible tension between both the traditional expectations of how women should behave, as well as the empowerment that they get through working. The existing literature on domestic work

performed by factory workers suggests that the women, despite being part of the labour force, are not exempt from performing domestic or care work responsibilities assigned to them (Duong et al, 2024). The videos analysed make that clear even for these factory workers. Additionally, within the confines of their digital portrayal of domestic and care work, the different tasks identified highlight some of the difference across genders.

In the case of Hoa and Phuong as well as Nam, both of their channels have more videos which directly show the child – parent relationship more explicitly, and more importantly, the still present double standard between men and women within family dynamics and the associated domestic and care work. In two Hoa and Phuong videos the influencers are bringing seafood to their parents' house where they bring a white Styrofoam packaging with ice and fresh seafood inside. One of the content creators then prepares a big metal steamer and places the food inside and cooks it, following which they sit at a table and eat the meal together outside. Examples of filial piety are evident in these types of videos as the parents are sitting at the table, and in both videos the parents are fed by their children (the influencers). The mother is fed with a spoon while the father is directly fed by hand. This type of behaviour is repeated in the channel, as well as appears natural as neither person sitting at the table makes a mistake, or any visible comment towards it. The entire exchange happens smoothly without a break.

Another case of filial piety by these influencers is in a video where one of the creators buys and brings a bottle of perfume for the mother. In some of the earlier takes she brings out the bottle and shows it to the camera to show the brand name and bottle, and in a later shot this bottle is taken to the mother where she is handed it as a gift directly by one of the content creators.

In the case of Nam, in some of his videos the viewer can see that he is preparing food for the family, or helping to some of the preparations such

as making a dish out of rice fried into round and flat shapes topped with a mixture of protein and vegetables. However, in other videos he is recording the mother while she prepares the food, and while he is helping to some extent such as handing some of the vegetables, the mother is the main cook and he serves in a more assisting manner. This type of content demonstrates that it is not just women or women influencers who are engaged in cooking tasks, showing men also performing stereotypically feminine tasks. However, it also shows the behaviour done by both as more visibly nurturing for women when coupled with the feeding and caring for the parents. Filial piety is then transformed into a gendered action, interpreted differently by the viewers depending on who performs it, and sustaining the narrative that women are better at this since it is part of their 'natural capacities' (Hoang, 2016 cited in Horat, 2018:58).

Continuing with interpersonal relations, we see how in the case of couples portrayed, the men within relationships of both Lan and Thu are seen as more caring and performing more tasks typically associated with women. These tasks include hair care or providing support to their partner via childrearing. Thu's partner is seen providing hair care for his partner, blow drying and brushing it in many of their videos in their living space, and in doing so, directly subverting the gender roles typically ascribed to men. Meanwhile, Lan's partner is very often seen as taking on the role of caring for the baby: lying in the bed and playing with their child, holding the child in his arms as he moves around in a gentle and slightly rocking motion. These show a shift in emotional norms by having the male partner take over some of the tasks she would either have to do for others (as in the case of childrearing), or for herself (as in the case of the hair care routine).

Lan's partner is directly engaged in a task which aims to alleviate Lan and her workload. This behaviour directly challenges the argument presented in McClelland and Sliwa (2023) which discusses how not only are women disproportionately

bearing domestic work, but also their work goes underestimated and misrepresented most of the times by their partner. Although, given the appearance of an older female (relationship to Lan is not entirely clear but we know it's familial) within Lan's videos, women are still the ones performing these tasks overall.

The act of caring for someone that one is close to in these specific examples does not seem to be something where women are seen as more nurturing than men. It does, however, extend the act of caring as tied to more of women's relationships, be it with their parents as well as their partner and children. For the men, it seems to be reserved for primarily their partners or children.

In addition to childrearing, another dynamic emerges in that Lan is not seen cooking at all. Contrastingly, in the case of Thu, she is the main cook. This portrayal in Lan's channel subverts the gender roles by directly showing how the woman is not cooking at all, resulting in her partner being the one that takes on most of these tasks. Although Lan's partner is helped by the older female present in Lan's videos, indicating a growing shift in attitudes as this task is divided among those two, rather than an egalitarian approach to cooking taking place in their dynamic or their wider family dynamics. On the other hand, while Thu is the main cook on her channel, the husband is occasionally seen helping in the kitchen. However, in the case of this channel, the gender role is reinforced even more than if she were the only one present to take over this task. The disparity in attitude to cooking between the two genders present grounds this gender role and portrays a divide in how the woman is the one upon whom the task most often falls on.

These channels present a dynamic which appears to be at the heart of these findings: that is a growing change in gender roles within southern Vietnamese factory workers' social circles. While it is true that overall women, (both younger as well as older women) are the ones that shoulder the domestic and care work burden the most, the older

men specifically are the ones that still appear to not be present or involved in this type of labour. Younger men such as Nam as well as the partners of both Lan and Thu are the most prominent examples of this growing shift. However, it should be noted that even within the channels chosen we see cases and hints where some gender norms and expectations as in the case of filial piety might hold true for women more than the men. Although, one could argue that this would pertain to the older generation rather than the younger one, indicating a space for the change to happen within their views.

Despite this, this change is not present amongst all young men in southern Vietnamese factory workers' social circles. The most noteworthy example would be Nam and his twin brother, and how within the tasks performed. One of the two brothers was sitting down and eating, while the other was sweeping the floors, suggesting masculine participation in domestic labour remains shaped by context rather than a moral expectation. In most of Nam's videos he is seen as performing all the domestic work tasks in his living space for himself only, portraying men's ability to conduct self-care care work practices. Nonetheless, in the case where two men are present and assumingly one party could take over the task, that scenario clearly indicated the disparity in domestic and care work performance and attitude in one brother compared to the other. This disparity could potentially tie on to the GDAP hypothesis seen in McClelland and Sliwa (2023) where it is possible that some men are beginning to develop an affordance perception (Nam, and Lan's and Thu's partners). It also suggests further gender norms are or even could be shifting due to some children not being gender trained otherwise or viewers of these channels seeing men perform these tasks. This distribution is not seen in a different scenario with two people dividing domestic tasks, Hoa and Phuong. In their case, we can see that the domestic tasks such as cooking, sweeping, or mopping in their living space are distributed between the two women. While not equally distribut-

ed, they were at least both involved in these acts on their channel, making their contribution more equitable, unlike Nam and his brother.

It is also important to note that these are social media videos, and at least part of the income of these influencers is directly tied to these videos. In the case of the seafood offered by Hoa and Phuong, the company name is advertised and promoted by the influencers. As such, at least a part or an aspect of these videos and the care work shown is performative, therefore any claims regarding these videos portraying the real authentic everyday life cannot be made. With that being said, this study is not aiming to shed light on real life practices of care work amongst this demographic in their private life, instead, what is the portrayal of gender online, and subsequently, what impact this could have on gender roles in the future, be it amongst current viewers, or even the influencers' lives themselves as a result of this behaviour.

To summarise, the findings drawn from the data makes it very clear that the portrayal of domestic and care work is reinforcing the gendered roles within contemporary Vietnam. Most women are performing domestic work, and the influencers themselves must balance their formal employment with domestic chores. The additional income from social media does not translate to breaking this burden down, instead, the societal roles remain, and the double burden persists, supporting the claims made by Duong et al (2024) that formal employment and income leads to empowerment to an extent, but also to a double burden. Even the only male influencer: Nam, while he is shown partaking in domestic and care work tasks, when compared with examples of women within his own videos the share of work is still larger on the women's side.

However, this is not a complete and absolute reinforcement. Regarding the younger generation of men in southern Vietnamese factory workers' social circles, there is a shift. More of them perform these gendered tasks, although under certain conditions (namely what the dynamic and relationship is be-

tween the care giver and receiver – as in the case of a child-parent dynamic), this shift and divide is less visible. While this is not seen in all young men, nor in the older generation of Vietnamese men, this shift could be the beginning of a wider societal reshaping of gender expectations and domestic work. It reflects Tronto and Fisher's claims that care is a collective moral responsibility and subsequently hints at a potential change in the existing power structures and notions of masculinity.

Conclusion

The main aim of this research was to answer the question: *"How does the digital portrayal of care work by Vietnamese light industry factory worker TikTok influencers reinforce or challenge gender roles in contemporary Vietnam?"* Due to the data chosen and selected, the scope of the question and findings was limited to just southern Vietnamese factory workers on TikTok specifically.

The findings illustrate that these videos reinforce current gender norms more so than challenge them. This ties to Duong et al (2024) by directly supporting their claim that simply working in factories, while it does provide financial independence, still leaves women affected by the societal gendered norms. The findings in this research directly support this, but also build upon it, showing how even further financial independence (because of their work as influencers and the need to create content) still results in women being the ones performing more of the domestic and care work in their private lives and on screen.

One thing of note is that the portrayal of gender norms towards domestic and care work is indeed, albeit slowly, changing within the chosen demographic. Some of the men within the videos are seen as taking over more domestic and care work, either in the form of providing care for the child, or directly to their partner. This reflects Tronto and Fisher's claims that care as a responsibility should be shared amongst everyone not just women. Al-

though, this behaviour is seen within the younger generation of men only.

This behaviour could be due to a potential shift in the younger generation and their ability to notice or be more willing to perform these tasks, or because these videos are more performative and done for views only. Nonetheless, despite being performative domestic and care work, the real effects on the recipient of said labour within the videos is still the same, and these videos could still lead to a shift or a wider change within gender norms (at least for working women) by being broadcast globally. Irrespective of the motivating factor or context, due to the outreach of social media this behaviour and the actors involved, could still influence the viewers into replicating this behaviour and normalising it.

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