

A NORDIC JOURNAL ON ASIA BY EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS

ASIA IN FOCUS

One Doesn't Preclude the Other

Dissociation and the Conditional Reception of Japanese Culture among Young Koreans

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PIERRE-ANTOINE DUC

Social and Cultural Capital Across Borders

Exploring the Backgrounds and Aspirations of Vietnamese Students in Germany

—
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The Commodification of a Labour Taken for Granted

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Representation of Southeast Asian women in the AI era

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REHNA SOTTO

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Editorial: Why publish in Asia in Focus?

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the twelfth issue of Asia in Focus.

Since the journal began publishing in 2015, we have been entrusted with so many brilliant manuscripts and have had the help of countless generous and thoughtful reviewers. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all of you for helping to make our work possible. Our contributors are mainly MA graduates and PhD students, and for many of them, Asia in Focus provides their first opportunity to publish in a peer-reviewed journal.

In the age of AI, academic publishing is becoming increasingly complicated. Academia is already full of stories of journals being flooded with AI-generated or AI-assisted articles, reviews increasingly being entrusted to AI tools, and a general sense of uncertainty about how to deal with this new reality. At Asia in Focus, we work closely with both authors and reviewers, and every manuscript, at every stage of the process, is checked by a human hand. I can vouch for this personally, as it is usually my hand!

We hope that Asia in Focus can continue to provide an outlet where authors know that they will always receive a response to their questions and concerns. We take a personal interest in every manuscript and in supporting authors throughout the publication process, from the first submission to the finish line.

Furthermore, as a published author in Asia in Focus myself, I can share a more personal experience. The essay I published with the journal continues, two years later, to generate emails and messages from people who have taken an interest in my work. A similar experience was also mentioned in the 2017 editorial of Asia in Focus (Issue 4, 2017). For an early-career researcher, this kind of opportunity is incredibly helpful.

In this issue, we are pleased to present the work of four authors writing on a diverse range of topics. First, **Pierre-Antoine Duc** examines the sometimes complex interplay between acknowledging history and appreciating culture among Korean youth inter-

ested in Japanese culture. Next, **Christine Moritz** explores the experiences of Vietnamese students in Germany and how these experiences relate to different forms of social and cultural capital. **Pawel Ostern** focuses on the dynamics of care work and domestic-work-related influencers. Finally, **Rehna Sotto** analyses representations of Southeast Asian women in ChatGPT-4o.

We would like to thank you once again for reading Asia in Focus and for supporting our journal.

Happy reading!

On behalf of the Editorial Team,
Julia Olsson
Managing Editor

One Doesn't Preclude the Other: *Dissociation and the Conditional Reception of Japanese Culture among Young Koreans*

PIERRE-ANTOINE DUC

This article examines how young South Korean consumers of Japanese culture negotiate their cultural engagement in the context of longstanding historical and political tensions between Japan and South Korea. Despite deep admiration for Japanese cultural products, surveys and public opinion consistently show that political distrust and unresolved historical grievances remain prominent. Through twelve semi-structured interviews with Korean university students self-identified as “otaku”, this study finds that participants actively separate their appreciation of Japanese culture from their rejection of Japanese politics and wartime history. This “dissociation” enables the enjoyment of Japanese products while maintaining a critical stance toward the Japanese state, resulting in a conditional and highly filtered reception of culture. The findings further show that this reception is shaped by individual socio-political factors – including national education, political polarisation, generational narratives, and social pressure – which act as interpretive filters rather than determinants. At the same time, cultural engagement can trigger an iterative renegotiation of identity, softening general perceptions of Japan without translating into political alignment or historical forgiveness. By highlighting dissociation and identity renegotiation as key dynamics, this article contributes to understanding cultural reception in conflictual settings and challenges assumptions that cultural attraction naturally and directly fosters political rapprochement.

Keywords: Reconciliation, Public diplomacy, Soft power, Cultural reception, Identity, Japan, South Korea, Popular Culture, Dissociation

The relationship between Japan and South Korea has long been marked by historical tensions rooted in Japan's imperialism, which materialised in its most concrete form in its colonial rule over the Korean peninsula in the first half of the 20th century. This period left heavy scars on both the bodies and minds of the Korean people, becoming deeply embedded in the national collective memory, which also results in the tensions persisting despite decades of formal diplomatic and political interactions between the two nations. "Reconciliation", as the process of restoring a harmonious relationship after a conflict is commonly referred to (He, 2009, p.1), remains uneven and far from fully achieved, and this is particularly evident on the societal level, where trust and mutual understanding continue to be challenged by remnants of historical grievance (Cho & Park, 2011, p.289). This dynamic continues to be observed in recurring joint surveys of both populations, where historical political mistrust remains a major issue for the overwhelming majority of participants, and more than half of Koreans continue to have a negative opinion of Japan (East Asia Institute & Genron NPO, 2023). In short, they consider the problem to be ongoing and by no means resolved.

But this situation also clashes with another really concrete reality: Japan and South Korea are fully integrated economically (Wong, 2005, p.7) and widely consume each other's culture. Anime and K-pop have found mass audiences on both sides since the late 1990s (Iwabuchi, 2015, p.7; Ahn & Yoon, 2020, p.4), and many individuals in both countries deeply enjoy the other's cultural products.

It therefore presents an interesting paradox: South Korean and Japanese populations still hold political resentment and distrust while engaging in each other's culture. This observation complicates assumptions shared by scholars and policymakers that cultural attraction naturally fosters political alignment. If the political effects are not that obvious, the main question that emerges is thus how audiences actually receive foreign culture in conflictual contexts.

To tackle this tension, this article asks: *how do young Korean otaku consume Japanese culture, and how do they situate this consumption within the antagonistic political context between the two countries?* Through semi-structured interviews, this research finds that participants proceed with an active process of dissociation, consisting of separating their appreciation of Japanese culture from their rejection of Japanese politics and history. This process, therefore, contributes to a conditional reception of Japanese culture. This partial reception is shaped by factors specific to each participant, which contribute to the formation of a personal identity that filters the norms associated with the cultural product. At the same time, the findings suggest that cultural engagement can initiate an iterative renegotiation of identity, acting as a catalyst that may soften perceptions of the other without necessarily generating political alignment.

Culture in a Historical Storm

Colonial Period and Trauma

Japan's colonial occupation of Korea from 1910 to

1945 was not limited to political domination, but was part of a broader project of physical, cultural, and ideological subjugation, driven by an imperial ideology that conceived of Japan as having a civilising mission toward its allegedly semi-barbaric neighbours, adapted from Western colonialism into a “yellow man’s burden” (Jung, 2006, p.6; Duus, 1995, p.433). This ideological framing provided the moral basis for practices that had a profound impact on Korean society. Eight million Koreans were mobilised as forced labourers, while between 100,000 and 200,000 women were subjected to military sexual slavery – the so-called “comfort women” system (Cumings, 2005, p.191; Hideki et al., 2023, p.1).

The daily oppression of the colonial administration also took the shape of policies focused on the very identity of the oppressed population. The *Sōshi-kaimei*, which pressured Koreans to adopt Japanese names, and the restriction of Korean language and cultural expression, were direct elements of this assimilationist project (Cumings, 2005, p.193; Otmazgin, 2012b, p.7). Known as *Naisen ittai*, this “Japanisation” process pushed Koreans to internalise the imperial identity, erasing the distinctions between coloniser and colonised while denying the legitimacy of Korean national consciousness, forming “a legitimate ground for South Korean grievance”, as Taku Tamaki noted (2020, p.4).

Formal Reconciliation and Its Shortcomings

When it comes to making sense of these historical traumas in current Japan-Korea relations, contemporary literature tends to frame reconciliation between the two countries predominantly as a matter of high politics and formal actions. The lasting resentment is not only attributed to the social and psychological trauma of the actions themselves, but also to the way these events have been politicised and memorialised. The evidence is plentiful: Japan’s handling of historical issues has been perceived in South Korea as insufficient or insincere, whether through apologies regarded as incomplete (Dud-den, 2008, p.33), official visits to contentious sites

such as the Yasukuni Shrine honouring war criminals, or political actions such as the revision of Japanese history textbooks to promote more nationalistic narratives (Saaler, 2006, 2015, p.11). Scholars supporting this view therefore argue that reconciliation requires concrete formal commitments from political elites – genuine self-reflection rather than putting the onus on the neighbour (Tamaki, 2020, p.13), forthright apologies, and symbolic gestures such as relinquishing territorial claims (Van Dyke, 2006, p.235).

Yet, this argument is contradicted by the fact that formal efforts have not been absent, and that one could even say that political reconciliation has taken place at this level: relations between the two countries were normalised in 1965 (United Nations, 1965), and subsequent agreements have been reached until very recently to settle historical issues, but were widely criticised domestically in both countries (Chun, 2019, p.387; Easley, 2023, p.56). Youngshik Bong notes, along the same lines, that more than forty statements of apology have been issued by Japanese governments since this normalisation (ed. Togo, 2013, p.60), but that these apologies have either not had the desired effect on the Korean population, who deemed them insufficient or inappropriate, or are even simply unknown in their substance to them (ed. Togo, 2013, p.56). This suggests that reconciliation cannot be achieved through a checklist of actions to be taken by political elites, but rather through the restoration of popular trust between the two societies. Reconciliation is indeed something that must go both ways, but this also implies that for an action to be effective, the population on the other side must itself be willing to receive it positively (Chun, 2015, p.328). This point, therefore, encourages us to focus more on the populations themselves as major actors in this process.

Culture as a Swaying Bridge

Culture offers perhaps the most striking illustration of this dynamic of ambivalent, politically initiated yet

not fulfilled rapprochement: a first phase of avoidance, followed by a strong political will to generate interactions. South Korea indeed maintained an extensive ban on Japanese cultural imports in fear of a new “Japanisation” where Japanese cultural influence would once again weaken Korean identity (Yoon, 2014, p.2). It was only in 1998, under the impetus of South Korean president Kim Dae-Jung, that the restrictions were progressively lifted (Iwabuchi, 2001, p.14), explicitly framing it as a vehicle for rapprochement. Once legally accessible, a real craving for Japanese cultural products emerged in Korea, driven in particular by the distribution of comics, music, and video games among young audiences (Park, 2005, p.9).

Cultural exchanges differ from most bilateral interactions in the genuine enthusiasm they generate: many Japanese people love Korean culture, and many Koreans love Japanese culture. Policymakers on both sides, including Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso, explicitly framed this mutual enthusiasm as a bridge toward reconciliation, assuming that cultural attraction would naturally reduce political resentment (Iwabuchi, 2001, pp.12–15, 2002, p.208, 2015, p.9).

However, these political assumptions have proven rather simplistic. The intensification of cultural flows did not eliminate social tensions, and the publication of the manga *Ken-Kanryu* in Japan in 2005 (literally *Hating the Korean Wave*) or the stigmatisation of Korean otaku consumers illustrate that cultural enthusiasm can coexist with, and even provoke, antagonistic reactions (Ahn & Yoon, 2020, p.4; Yoon, 2014, p.3). More fundamentally, several researchers such as Chua Beng Huat and Nissim Otmazgin have highlighted an active attitude on the part of the audience, which filters, reinterprets, compartmentalises, or challenges the culture it receives and the norms it conveys, so that political alignment is not linear, or even often unpredictable (Chua, 2012, p.81; Otmazgin, 2012a, p.7). Otmazgin also found that a positive impression of one aspect of the other can also coexist with a negative view of

other aspects of it (Otmazgin, 2007, p.23). Culture here proves both to be volatile in its direct influence on each consumer’s opinion, and on the general reception of those consumers within their own society. A product may be appreciated aesthetically or even emotionally, but the social symbolism of that product, and the practices associated with it, remain contested and ambivalent individually and collectively. These observations have been made, however, without unpacking the underlying mechanism: how exactly audiences negotiate this tension remains empirically underexplored by the contemporary literature.

Culture, therefore, occupies a paradoxical position in the Japan-Korea relationship: it represents perhaps the most direct channel through which the two populations interact and engage with one another, generating the kind of genuine grassroots enthusiasm that formal reconciliation initiatives have struggled to produce. Unlike purely political gestures, such as apologies, treaties or diplomatic declarations, cultural exchange implicates the populations themselves as primary actors, making it a uniquely promising avenue for the societal reconciliation that elite-level actions have so far failed to achieve. While reconciliation literature, especially on the Japan-Korea case, acknowledges culture as a potential vector for rapprochement, it has largely treated this role as self-evident rather than interrogating the mechanisms through which cultural engagement actually shapes, or fails to shape, popular attitudes (Chua, 2012, p.143).

Yet the gap between cultural attraction and political alignment, as highlighted above, complicates any straightforward optimism. How exactly do consumers internalise, or resist, the norms associated with a foreign cultural product? How do they reconcile genuine appreciation with persistent national antagonism? These questions have been raised but not empirically investigated. This article, therefore, seeks to address this gap by asking: how do young Korean otaku consume Japanese culture, and how do they situate this consumption within

the antagonistic political context between the two countries?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, inductive research design based on semi-structured interviews, suited to exploring how participants make sense of their cultural engagement in a politically contested context. Twelve Korean university students aged 18 to 29, all self-identified otaku, were recruited through purposive sampling – seven via a university club dedicated to Japanese popular culture, the remainder through snowballing. As the population most exposed to Japanese culture, otaku represent those most likely to be influenced by it, making their possible political stance all the more analytically significant.

The interviews were conducted in English, both face-to-face and online, depending on each participant's availability and convenience. They all lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and followed a pre-established guide containing broad themes that were not intended to be followed rigidly. Participants were anonymised and given pseudonyms based on common Korean names for clarity in the reporting of findings.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and analysed using the software NVivo, proceeding with an inductive thematic analysis to highlight recurring patterns that structure the subparts of the Interviews section of the article. Sentiments were classified from participants' own evaluative language, including admiration, attachment, resentment, distrust, hatred and political criticism.

Interview Data

Cultural Engagement

Participants demonstrate diverse interests within Japanese culture, though nearly all engage, to varying degrees, with anime and J-pop. Only one

participant states explicitly that they are interested in neither of these two forms. However, each participant's primary focus can be far more niche. These passions are unique and linked to each individual's interests, and these niche interests also highlight how Japanese culture manifests beyond mainstream media.

For eight out of the twelve participants, a spillover effect occurred. They first engaged with one specific source of cultural product, and this source led them to be interested in other related aspects, broadening their general engagement with Japan. A participant named Siwoo describes how this process worked on him: *"In 2016, I saw the movie Your Name. And I heard the OST of the movie. So, I wanted to understand the songs and the lyrics of the movies or something. So, I started to study about Japanese language, and I am interested about Japan after that movie."*

Culture therefore has the potential to foster broader engagement with other cultural aspects, operating on an interconnected whole in which the level of engagement, rather than the type of culture, ultimately shapes participants' perception of Japan.

Perceptions and Representations of Japan: The Culture-Politics Divide

The participants nearly all nurture a real admiration for Japan's cultural dimension as a whole, for its diversity, encompassing the products they consume. This appreciation of culture also stems from its sophistication. Some participants explain that Japanese culture is appealing as it evokes other aspects of Japanese culture. It is clear that popular culture refers to more traditional notions, sometimes more closely linked to the essence of Japan, which may also explain the overall positive image that emerges in this regard. The participants also emphasise the Japanese ability to make the most of their culture. Minsoo goes so far as to express admiration, saying, *"They just built an empire of anime, weeb and video games. And I think it's something to be admired."*

What emerges from the participants' inter-

views is that their vision of Japan is generally positive in these socio-cultural dimensions, but not blind: if they like these aspects, it is with “due knowledge”, because of the way Japan promotes them or because they represent a real diversity of culture.

This relatively positive view of Japanese culture contrasts with a highly critical approach to Japan on the political and historical dimensions shared by ten participants. On one hand, this negative approach focuses on the very nature of the Japanese political system, in which the LDP – the conservative party – has been in power nearly continuously for the past 70 years, which Minjun describes as anything but a “politically healthy balance”. However, the main criticism lies above all in the actions of Japanese politicians concerning Japan-Korea relations, particularly in the light of historical issues. These notions of sincerity and trust are central to their negative impression of political Japan. This resentment toward political and historical Japan is even manifested as a strong emotional reaction in six participants. Yejun explains clearly: *“The deeper you think about the political situation, and that also relates to the historical situation, the more you will eventually hate Japan.”*

Conversely, only one participant, Dohyun, explicitly expresses a favourable view of the Japanese political scene, and a detachment from historical issues, as he considers Japan’s imperialist past as “the rule of the time, [as for Korea,] a weak country, it was a fate to be beaten”. This view can be attributed to his conservative political values, which led him to identify with the Japanese conservative party’s rhetoric and hope for a similar model in Korea.

But for most, a concrete compartmentalisation of the appreciation of Japan emerges: they appreciate Japanese culture and society, but reject its politics and anything related to historical problems. This process of dissociation remains similar in its functioning for all participants. Jihu illustrates: *“Politically, I would say I don’t really like the country, but otherwise, I like Japan, yeah.”*

Dohyun, for example, who harbours a favour-

able view of Japan’s politics and history, explains this dissociation in his approach to culture. His political alignment, therefore, seems completely independent of his investment in culture: *“When we’re just into those things, we don’t think about other political and economic conflicts, so it’s easier to be closer.”*

Historical Awareness, Memory, and Socio-Political Factors

As seen in the previous section, most participants attribute their negative perception of Japanese politics to historical issues, but also acknowledge that their own understanding of this historical aspect is filtered through a political lens. Many point out that this historical perception was their very first impression of Japan, even before the emergence of their interest in culture, and that it had been enforced through the educational system and memorials. Nine out of twelve participants also qualify Korean historical education as ideologically biased towards an anti-Japanese position. Dohyun explains that Japan is represented as “a kind of villain in Korean history”, and Junseo goes further, describing “an immense amount of unconscious and conscious indoctrination” through teachers that led him to “naturally grow to dislike Japan” before any engagement with its culture.

Some participants clearly link this anti-Japan view in Korean education to a political side, the left-leaning liberals. This is symptomatic of a pattern of political polarisation that eight participants mention. For some participants, this opposition is not ideological, and Junseo evokes this as a means of political survival, insisting that “they just do it because of populism. It is helpful.” Yejun, for his part, describes the position towards Japan as a political issue on which people do not necessarily have a strong opinion, but will simply follow the position of their political camp, as the “small idea follows the big idea”.

This compartmentalisation of politics is also argued regarding the generational question. All par-

ticipants explain that middle-aged and older people generally have a much more negative perception of Japan and its culture than younger generations, but the theme that comes up most often is a stronger emotional attachment among older generations, due to their greater proximity to the traumas, whereas younger generations feel less concerned.

There is, therefore, a sense of emotional attachment shaping the way they perceive others, which can condition their openness to culture. This also echoes the fact that the participant who has the strongest opinion against Japanese politics is Sub-in, the only one to mention a traumatic experience visiting a memorial: *“I went to the Independence Hall of Korea, in memory of our independence from Japan, and I was really shocked as they showed how Japanese people tortured Korean people...”*

The last factor mentioned by participants is social pressure. As antagonism towards Japan is relatively common in Korean society, social pressure emerges for those willing to be influenced or express a favourable position towards Japan. For example, six participants refer to the 2019 No-Japan movement, and Kunwoo describes:

“Using Japanese stuff, watching Japanese media was... They would cyberbully anyone they found. It was almost like they considered it a crime.”

Culture as a Catalyst

Many participants acknowledge that their cultural consumption changed their own perception of Japan. This is especially noticeable when participants are invited to self-reflect on their opinion of Japan before engaging with the culture. Some participants mention that they were generally indifferent towards the country, but eight of them clearly explain that their view would be somewhat negative if they did not get interested in Japanese culture. The change relates to their general perception of Japan but does not imply political alignment or historical forgiveness, which remains independent. Minjun continues: *“I think that Japanese subculture changed my view of Japan and the image of Ja-*

pan for the better, yeah, but I don't think subculture changed my historical opinion.”

The participants mention that for six of them, culture triggered a real reflection on their own biases, which allowed them to adopt at least a more nuanced view. The participants all describe this phenomenon differently, but their overall understanding of the process is similar, as a kind of renegotiation of identity. Junseo clarifies: *“Rather than Japanese culture influencing political perception, it is more accurate to say that it helps dismantle the indoctrination and biases instilled about Japanese people.”*

The fundamental idea here is that culture does not overwhelm historical issues nor erase them. However, it offers new opportunities to conceive Japan through more positive aspects that allow for a variation in an otherwise negative sentiment. Culture appears to call for self-reflection on what made people perceive the country in a certain way.

Discussion and Conclusion

“Culture is kind of like the clothes you wear when you meet someone for the first time. If you see them wearing nice clothes, you think them as positive at first, but after some time, and as you get to know each other, it doesn't really matter that much.”

This analogy from Minsoo captures the core dynamic observed throughout this study: while Japanese culture successfully generates emotional engagement and a positive impression among Korean youth, its political and ideational influence fades as deeper, historical and political considerations resurface. Thus, this attraction does not translate into direct political alignment or reconciliation regarding past disputes.

Regarding their perception of Japan, they all explicitly separated cultural Japan from political Japan. To a certain extent, this induces the creation of two different, incompatible versions of the country. Cultural Japan is admired, while political Japan is

despised for its relationship with history. The participants' reception of culture is therefore not linear. This separation, referred to here as dissociation, is sometimes unconscious and allows individuals to enjoy the positive aspects without suffering the negative ones. It also relieves the participants of a moral burden or social pressure.

If this dissociation occurs between culture and politics, it is not easy to identify its reasons. The interviews highlight the existence of socio-political factors specific to each individual that led to their reception of culture. These factors are independent of the cultural product itself, and their norms are internalised by the participants in order to filter the culture they receive. The reception of cultural products is therefore conditional and constantly filtered by the individual's own context. In this regard, these findings echo the audience reception theory introduced by Stuart Hall, whereby messages are encoded in cultural products and then conditionally decoded by the audience upon reception (Hall, 2010).

This influence is particularly evident in the more gradual opening of the participants to a more positive view of Japan following their sustained investment in its culture. Some participants suggested that culture, in this case, offers more varied opportunities for viewing the country beyond historical resentments alone. Thus, this implies that culture acts on the filter that is historical education, reducing its impact or offering alternatives.

This leads to a more open attitude towards culture and the country, creating a favourable environment that remains, however, limited by issues of political trust, which must be addressed in other ways. Culture thus promotes ideational reconciliation to a certain extent, as its influence on participants establishes an increasingly favourable environment open to efforts. That said, and as in most reconciliation initiatives, no direct political influence seems possible in this regard, particularly due to a lack of sincerity.

Therefore, while this research does not resolve

the 70-year-old reconciliation problem between Japan and South Korea, nor does it illuminate directly how culture can be leveraged for political rapprochement, it provides concrete insight into how young Koreans heavily influenced by Japanese culture situate this attraction within their broader socio-political context. Further studies might productively build on the concepts of dissociation and identity renegotiation introduced here.

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Social and Cultural Capital Across Borders:

Exploring the Backgrounds and Aspirations of Vietnamese Students in Germany

CHRISTINE MORITZ

This article investigates how Vietnamese students explain their choice to study in Germany, by drawing on data from eight semi-structured interviews. The students' accounts revealed that they all possessed specific, pre-existing social and cultural capital related to Germany. In terms of outcomes, all students focused on gaining a form of transnational institutionalized cultural capital, as they view a German bachelor's or master's degree primarily as a vehicle for further transnational mobility and personal and career development, rather than necessarily seeking to remain in Germany or return to Vietnam after their studies. This article also highlights how existing links between East Germany and Vietnam which developed prior to the 1990s continue to influence student mobilities by shaping the specific forms of embodied cultural capital, institutionalized cultural capital and social capital available to students. These insights add to the body of literature which seeks to extend Bourdieu's theoretical concepts to the transnational activities of East Asian and other globally mobile elites. (Marginson, 2008; Norén-Nilsson, Savirini & Uhlin, 2023).

Keywords: Vietnam, Germany, Higher education, International student mobility, Transnational education

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

The Vietnamese government has a stated policy of encouraging out-migration for the purposes of work and education, but destinations are chosen by individuals and the reasons for these individual choices are under-researched. Considerable attention has been paid to certain Vietnamese migrant communities in various countries, with the Vietnamese community in Germany being a prominent example (see for example Wolf & Lowman, 1990; Schwenkel, 2017). However, these studies have typically focused on labour migrants who arrived during significant historical periods, for instance during a period of cultural exchange between communist countries and the former Deutsche Demokratische Republik [German Democratic Republic], otherwise known as East Germany (for convenience, and to distinguish it from the contemporary German state, this is hereafter referred to as the DDR). Students from Vietnam have received less attention, perhaps because they are expected to reside in the destination country only temporarily.

This investigation seeks to shed light on the reasons for Vietnamese students' choice to study in Germany, considering their educational histories and backgrounds. In doing so, it contributes to existing literature about how the growing number of internationally mobile East Asian students makes the decisions regarding their study choices (Kenway & Fahey, 2014), but also sheds greater light on the social backgrounds and attitudes of university-educated Vietnamese citizens who either plan to live abroad for a time or have already done so, who now constitute an important subgroup of Vietnamese society in their own right. To do this, I employ the

theoretical concepts introduced by Bourdieu, with a particular emphasis on social, economic and cultural capital, to shed light on the complex reasons for people's actions as they navigate social fields.

The first part of this article outlines key concepts from this theoretical framework and provides contextualizing information on the current state of research on Vietnamese and German higher education as well as international student mobility. The second part of this article details the research process and results.

Theoretical Background

This article utilises Bourdieu's theory of *elite reproduction*, with reference to the concepts of *social, cultural, and economic capital*, to analyse how Vietnamese students leverage and accumulate different forms of capital in their pursuit of higher education in Germany. Situated within social conflict theories of education (Chernoff, 2013), Bourdieu's approach views education as a key mechanism through which social inequalities are reproduced under the guise of meritocracy (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu's theories of capital describe social mechanisms for the 'distribution of material resources and means of appropriation of socially scarce goods and values' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.7). While Bourdieu described four primary forms of capital – economic, cultural, social and symbolic – it is the three first that are central in this analysis.

Economic capital refers to financial resources and assets, and their equivalents. Cultural capital takes two forms: *Embodied cultural capital* is

Bourdieu's explanation for how the external, social world is transposed into an individual's internal self or 'second nature' (Moore, 2008, p.110); and *Institutionalized cultural capital* refers to one specific way in which cultural capital can be given a more permanent value through legitimation by the state, for instance through university diplomas that give academic credentials. Social capital is the network of connections possessed by an actor, which can potentially be 'called in' and converted to other forms of capital. (Bourdieu, 1986)

Although Bourdieu's theories originated in the France of his day, recent scholarship has extended his work to transnational settings (Amelina et al., 2012; Koh & Kenway, 2016; Marginson, 2008). This paper seeks to build on this work by taking a 'multiscalar' approach (Koh & Kenway, 2016) which takes into account the accumulation of social status through education on a variety of geographic 'levels', which the recipient may subsequently interact with in distinct ways.

Higher Education in Vietnam: History and Current Challenges

To contextualise the findings in this paper, the next section gives a brief overview of the development of Vietnamese higher education, as well as the growth of the foreign student population in Germany.

The mismatch between the type of higher educational content which is perceived to be 'prestigious', and actual workforce needs, has been observed by researchers to be particularly acute in Vietnam (St George, 2014), due to the fact that Vietnamese higher education developed out of a system of competitive state examinations, designed to prepare young men for civil service. Under this system, ascent into the bureaucracy was, in theory, wholly dependent on merit. Eventually, the highest of these qualifications, *Tiến sĩ* became conflated in the Vietnamese understanding with the Soviet 'doctor of science' title, and thereafter with the PhD in its current form (St George, 2014, p.97). This historical background contributed to the idealization of

theoretical, research-oriented university qualifications as the best preparation for elite careers.

Modern higher education policy in Vietnam reflects a structural-functionalist attitude towards higher education (Collins, 1971) in which an increase in absolute numbers of students is seen as a key to economic and social development, and the development of private and foreign higher education options are actively encouraged. To promote these goals, the Vietnamese government has published a number of laws and guidelines on higher education development over the last few decades. For instance, in parallel to the publication of the updated Education Law of 2005, the Vietnamese government also published its Resolution no. 14/2005/NQ-CP, otherwise known as the Higher Education Reform Agenda or HERA in English (Parajuli et al., 2020; Pham 2018), which aimed to open up Higher Education in Vietnam to for-profit institutions and foreign investment, in order to massively expand both the overall quantity and quality of provision: 'To expand the training scale, attaining the rate of 200 students and 450 students for every 10,000 people by 2010 and 2020 respectively' (Thị Vĩnh Phúc, 2005) for the purpose of 'satisfying the requirements of national industrialization and modernization, international economic integration and people's learning demands' (ibid.). These laws and policies have contributed to a massive increase in overall higher education enrolment in the country, including in privately owned institutions; from 2000 to 2010, total enrolment more than doubled from 0.9 million to 2.3 million students (Parajuli et al., 2020).

International Students in German Higher Education

Like many other countries, Germany has seen a meteoric growth in its international student population; numbers rose from 394,665 to 469,485 in the 6 years from 2018-2024 alone (Kelmendi, 2024). Unlike many other countries in Europe and elsewhere, however, German public universities still charge no additional fees for international students. Instead, all students pay the same 'semester fees',

which range from around 100-300 euros. In fact, in a previous survey carried out by Study in Germany (2025) international students quoted affordability as the most important consideration in their choice of study destination, at 35.3% of those surveyed. Instead, the major barrier to entry remains the fact that most bachelor's degrees at public universities are taught through the German language.

Research Process

In summary, this research seeks to investigate how a particular group of international students chooses and navigates a non-marketised higher education system in Europe, and to what extent the different forms of capital and existing social and historical ties may be significant in such an environment. Specifically, the central question of investigation is how Vietnamese students in Germany explain the reasons for their choice to study there.

The article contributes with insights on what existing forms of capital this group leverages in order to study in Germany, and any similarities in the typical backgrounds, goals and attitudes amongst this group of students. In addition, the research seeks to understand what forms of capital (social, economic or cultural) the interviewees anticipated to gain from studying in Germany. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted during the spring term of 2025, with each lasting around 45 minutes.

To gather background information about the history and current processes behind Vietnamese students coming to Germany to study, I interviewed two university lecturers, 'Linda' and 'Chi' who differ from the other interviewees in that they were not students at the time of the interview, and they had not completed a degree in Germany during the past 10 years. Linda is a German citizen born in the DDR who married a Vietnamese man and lived in Vietnam for several decades, before returning to Germany. Due to her various professional roles (detailed in the interview below), her experiences and insights provided valuable background information

on how multifaceted historical and institutional ties between the German and Vietnamese governments and higher education systems developed, and how they continue to impact student decision making to this day.

Chi both lectures at a German university and works with a private agency recruiting Vietnamese students and assisting them in their journey to study in Germany. In interviewing her, I chiefly sought to understand the role of private education agents in contemporary student journeys, and to what extent this might influence individual students' choices and motivations. As it turns out, however, the majority of Vietnamese students studying in Germany do not use such agents. Chi herself estimated that the number of students taking this route to be perhaps 10%, with most support ceasing once the student has graduated from their 'Studienkolleg' the agency initially arranged for them and moved on to their main university. Indeed, none of the students I ultimately interviewed had used an agency.

In arranging the student interviews, my main selection criteria were designed to take a purposive sampling approach (Bryman, 2016), meaning that the individuals were selected based on certain criteria – namely that they should self-identify as Vietnamese, have completed their schooling in Vietnam, and then have come to Germany with the intention of studying for a university degree.

Findings

1. *Evolution of Vietnamese Student Mobility to Germany in Recent History*

The first interview conducted was with Linda, a university lecturer who was heavily involved with the system bringing foreign students to Germany during the DDR. Linda began working at the Herder Institute at the Karl Marx University (now the University of Leipzig), which was the foundation college responsible for students coming to study in the DDR from the rest of the world, in the 1970s and 1980s.

Figure 1 Research participants

Interview Number (in order of date conducted)	Pseudonyms	Sex	Role/ Interview Focus	Interview Location	Main Interview Language	D e g r e e s studied in Germany
1.	Linda	F	Lecturer	Face-to-face	German	N/A
2.	Chi	F	Lecturer	Zoom	German	(Old Style Integrated) Master's in Sinology and German Linguistics
3.	Hoa	F	Student	Face-to-face	English	Master of business communications Bachelor of Business Communications
4.	Son	M	Student	Zoom	English	Bachelor of Electrical Engineering
5.	Binh	F	Student	Zoom	English	Bachelor in Business Informatics
6.	Ngoc	F	Student	Zoom	English	MBA
7.	An	F	Student	Zoom	English	Bachelor in Business Psychology
8.	Tran	F	Student	Zoom	English	Bachelor in Business Administration

At the time, all arriving Vietnamese students had to study there, typically for one year. The Vietnamese government decided which subjects students should study, and stipends were sponsored by the DDR government. The students studied a very broad range of fields, including German Language and Linguistics, Archival Sciences, Natural Sciences and Law to name just a few. As Linda (2025-03-06) explicates, “the assumption of the Vietnamese (government)...in the 1970s and 1980s was that they really needed (qualified) people in every field”.

This suggests that, even at that time, the Vietnamese government took the *technical-functional view* (Collins, 1971) that encouraging as many students as feasible to acquire university level education would be instrumental in overall social development.

Some years later, Linda was working at the German Embassy in Hanoi, where she was responsible for *Die Akademische Prüfstelle*, the government agency responsible for validating foreign academic qualifications for German immigration and employment purposes (Deutsche Vertretung in Vietnam, 2025). There, she realised the access conditions had worsened in the intervening years, because students applying needed a school leaving certificate, university entrance exam, and an additional two semesters of study at undergraduate level in Vietnam, before they could even enter a foundation college in Germany. However, there was a recognition at the German Embassy of the soft power benefits of Vietnamese students studying in Vietnam, as they were aware that many of the people then at the top of government departments were graduates from the DDR, who had a continuing interest in good relations with Germany due to their previous experiences there.

In this way, significant *cultural and institutional capital* has been built up in northern Vietnam in relation to Germany and German educational connections. Strikingly, in a sign that these links continue to influence mobility up until the present day, all of the students interviewed grew up in Hanoi,

apart from Binh, whose family home is in Hai Phong, three hours away, but who was nonetheless raised with the expectation that she would attend Hanoi National University (if she did not go abroad). Although the students interviewed for this research were certainly not selected as a representative sample of the entire Vietnamese student population in Germany, this is nonetheless very notable, given that the author made no attempt to select students from a particular geographic origin within Vietnam.

These findings therefore give insights into how current educational links between Vietnam and Germany are a continuation of the links that were built up between the DDR and Vietnam, and how these affect students' individual choices in the present day. The existing *social capital* and relationships built up between them historically are kept, even once political reality has radically shifted.

2. Existing Forms of Capital which Students Leverage to Study in Germany

Existing Economic Capital

All the students interviewed make use of *economic capital* or its equivalent, in the sense that they were all able to focus exclusively on studying German or English prior to going to Germany, typically for 6 or 9 months. Bourdieu (1986) points out that additional time spent on education represents a common elite reproduction strategy by ensuring the conversion of existing *economic capital* into future *embodied cultural capital* and *institutionalized cultural capital*. Except for Ngoc, who improved her English and prepared for the IELTS exam while still working, all did this with financial support from their family. No one mentioned working part time or receiving financial aid prior to leaving Vietnam. However, overall, the students interviewed seem to have leveraged greater levels of *social* and *cultural* than *economic capital*. Several mentioned now working to support themselves, and nearly all explicitly emphasized low/no tuition as a decisive reason for choosing Germany for their studies.

Personal Links

All the student interviewees mentioned that the decision to study in Germany was initiated through family links, and that the seeds for the decision were planted at a young age. Son's father had spent a year working in a factory in the DDR. All the other interviewees had either an aunt or older sister already living in Germany and were strongly encouraged to go and study abroad by their parents, who viewed Germany as the natural choice, given their personal links to the country. This strongly suggests that existing *social capital* in the form of these contacts, as well as the *embodied cultural capital* perceived to have been gained by those who had already emigrated to Germany are a key facilitating factor in the decision-making process.

3. Forms of Capital Which Students Seek to Acquire

Perception of Educational Quality and Subject Choice

Many of the interviewees mentioned educational quality as a key reason for choosing to study abroad. Almost all the interviewees said the idea that studying abroad is better than studying in Vietnam is generally accepted within their social circles back home, and never really questioned. As An (2025-04-23) said: 'In my bubble...people always talk about studying abroad.'

On the other hand, when mentioning their reasons for choosing Germany specifically, the answers given were much more concrete. Apart from the affordability issue, which was mentioned by every single interviewee, many also cited Germany's reputation for educational quality in their specific subject area. Son mentioned Germany's reputation specifically for technical subjects. Ngoc stated outright that "I would like to come to Germany because I think the education here is very good", citing more opportunities for discussion, supportive lecturers who were willing to explain content to the students, as well as the opportunity to develop "critical think-

ing" skills– which she perceives to be lacking in the Vietnamese educational system. Chi also suggested that most of the students who come to study in Germany nowadays do so to study technical subjects or business (which is consistent with the subject choices of the students interviewed – see figure 1). This suggests the desire to gain *institutionalized cultural capital* in the form of educational credentials, as well as technical and professional skills, which are a form of *embodied cultural capital* (Moore, 2008).

Career and Future Plans

Most of the interviewees did not have a strong opinion on whether they wanted to stay in Germany permanently, stating that the decision hinges on whether they find a job which suits them and allows them to fulfil their other personal and professional aims. Many felt, however, that it was important to continue working in Germany for some time after graduating, as this would be looked on more favourably if they tried to get a professional job in Vietnam in the future.

"In my opinion, when I already spend 4 years to study here in Germany, I think I should find a job here and work here for a period of time. I think if I just go back to Vietnam, it will be hard to find a job", (Binh, interview 2025-04-15).

It seems, therefore, that the interviewees do not view remaining in Germany as a necessary precondition to immediately acquire additional *economic capital* once they have finished their degrees. Instead, some view spending a few more years in Germany as a way of further enhancing the *embodied cultural capital* they can claim from their individual experiences, while others believe that the *institutionalized cultural capital* gained from their degrees will be sufficient to work in a country of their choice. This suggests once again that students seek to accumulate forms of *cultural capital* which are explicitly transnational in nature, and which can be con-

verted into additional *economic capital* in future. In other words, the participants view the German qualification and skilled work experience as a form of *transnational institutionalised cultural capital* with exchange value (Bourdieu, 1996) across multiple national *fields*, rather than being tied exclusively to the German labour market.

Conclusion

The experiences of international students worldwide are a significant current issue in the sociology of higher education, while the rapid expansion of Vietnamese higher education is a salient topic within Vietnamese society. This research has shown how students who choose to study in Germany leverage existing *social capital* and *embodied cultural capital*, for instance through relatives living in Germany, as well as existing community and educational links. They are less likely to leverage large amounts of *economic capital*, in terms of course fees or high upfront agency fees, though they all invest considerable amounts indirectly in terms of additional time and effort spent on language education prior to arriving in Germany. The findings also highlight the importance of existing educational and institutional links, the foundation of which were laid between the DDR and northern Vietnam prior to 1990 and continue to influence patterns of educational exchange between Germany and Vietnam today.

This research adds to the growing literature within Bourdieu's framework which seeks to transcend the 'methodological nationalism' of his original studies on educational advantage (Amelina et al., 2012, in Kenway, 2016), and analyse the specific mix of cultural, social and economic capital leveraged by East Asian students as they navigate challenges and opportunities in international education to acquire various forms of cultural capital which they expect to translate fluidly across geographical spaces. These processes and challenges may be markedly different to those faced by students attending elite schools or universities in their home

country (Ong, 1999; Kenway and Fahey, 2014). Analysing these processes can help us to enrich our understanding of how the use and acquisition of various forms of social, cultural and economic capital play out across borders.

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Domestic Work Influencers in Vietnam:

The Commodification of a Labour Taken for Granted

PAWEL OSTERN

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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Representation of Southeast Asian women in the AI era

REHNA SOTTO

ASIA IN FOCUS

Nowadays, information seeking has evolved with the existence of AI-powered platforms. One example is ChatGPT. This provides users with a faster, convenient, and conversational synthesis of answers to queries. Considering ChatGPT's unique features, this study explores how ChatGPT's information portrays a specific group of people. In particular, the main interest was the representation of Southeast Asian women. Much research has investigated representations of these women in the media; however, there is limited information on how these women were portrayed in any AI platforms like ChatGPT. With this, the study utilized actual data gathered from the conversation with ChatGPT and was analyzed using qualitative inductive content analysis. The results revealed the equivocal nature of ChatGPT-4o. The findings also showed both traditional and modern femininity characterization of Southeast Asian women, how religion affects the cultural and societal system, and the struggles of women in the region. Thus, emphasizing a continued women's empowerment towards an equal and just society.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, women, content analysis, AI, ChatGPT

Globalized and industrialized society brings forth new technological innovations to serve humankind. One of the recent developments was the so-called birth of artificial intelligence (AI). This artificial intelligence is believed to be helpful in many aspects. Some studies indicate that their uses can be beneficial in increasing work efficiency and productivity (Kukkala, 2025), in reducing human error (Sierra et al., 2025), in assisting humans in doing their jobs (Xiao et al., 2025), and in seeking information (Link & Beckmann, 2025). One of the most popular AI-powered platforms is ChatGPT, a type of Large Language Model (LLM), which was trained to analyze massive amounts of data to answer human queries on a specific subject (Introducing ChatGPT, 2024). ChatGPT is believed to hold human-like conversations. ChatGPT was described as an efficient tool for getting quick and detailed answers to questions (Hahn et al., 2025). The capability of AI systems to mine and analyze massive text information using algorithms participates in the co-construction of social knowledge (Kousa, 2025) and societal sustainability (Al-Emran et al., 2025).

With ChatGPT's feature of knowledge-sharing (Zhong & Wang, 2025), it is justifiable to explore how ChatGPT encodes, presents information, and shapes knowledge about a specific group of people. In the past years, much research has investigated, for instance, representations of women in the media. However, there is limited knowledge about how AI, such as ChatGPT, portrays a specific group of women. Therefore, the purpose of this paper was to analyze how ChatGPT shaped the portrayal of

women in a specific society. Particularly, the focus of the investigation was on Southeast Asian women. The portrayals of these women in other influential platforms, like ChatGPT, could shed light on AI systems' perceptions and assumptions about these women, which could promote gender awareness and knowledge in Asian society and beyond. Thus, the research question for this exploratory study is, *"How does ChatGPT portray and compare Southeast Asian women?"*

Theoretical Background

In Southeast Asia, gender disparities and discrimination continued to affect women. The intersection of religious and cultural practices and inconsistent legal reforms in the region contribute to the exclusion and marginalisation of these women (Ahmad et al., 2024; Fonte & Huang, 2026). There is greater inequality between women and men in terms of right for decent work and issues of power (Nair, 2022). In some countries like Singapore, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia, there is a mismatch between the desire for an egalitarian society and the actual behavior of people towards gender equality (Jiang et al., 2023). Women are still entangled between their professional work, family duties, and traditional practices.

In terms of media representation, women, for instance, in the Philippines, are stereotypically represented as homemakers in marketing advertisements with the association of home settings, and home and beauty care products (Prieler & Centeno, 2025). There were more women in home advertise-

ments and men in the workplace advertisements. In Indonesian films, women are stereotypically portrayed as dependent on men, which reinforces the patriarchal culture in the society (Budiana, 2024). In Thai and Vietnamese films, women are portrayed as weak, depicting male dominance (Ruangnapaku et al., 2018; Thi Minh, 2024). This type of media portrayal mirrors traditional femininity. This means that women are viewed based on their nurturing appearance (Schmeichel et al., 2020), their household prowess (Davis et al., 2018), and their social status as being subordinates to men (Adeney-Risakotta, 2016). This is against the backdrop of modern femininity as emphasized by other researchers (Daraz et al., 2025) wherein it rejects traditional gender roles. Women from modern femininity viewpoints are perceived as independent, empowered, and equal to men (Hirji, 2021).

With recent technological advancements, gender issues and stereotypes are not only prevalent in media and films. These issues also exist in some artificial intelligence (AI) platforms. In the study by García-Ull & Francisco-José (2023), AI-generated images of women showed full stereotypes of women compared to men. Whilst the bibliometric analysis by Pop et al. (2025) reflects AI bias, and gender and societal biases. Their findings call for the attention of academicians, technologists, and policy makers to address these biases. This also connects with other studies on how AI systems reinforced cross-lingual and political biases (Urman & Makhortykh, 2023). The AI systems' biases informed that AI-knowledge could also be subjective (Gayones et al., 2025).

As AI use is the future and it is inevitable, it is significant to explore and examine how a certain AI system portrays women in a specific society, like in the Southeast Asian region. Southeast Asian women are positioned in the literature, media, and films in a more traditional way. Investigating the portrayals in AI-powered platforms, for instance, could illustrate how AI tackles a sensitive societal issue and exhibits moral judgment (Ta et al., 2025).

Methods

Data collection

The data for this study were collected through chatting with the Large Language Model (LLM) ChatGPT. I chose ChatGPT over other LLMs because of its prominence around the world and its free version offer, making it more accessible to anyone with an internet connection. I used the ChatGPT-4o free version. The reason for choosing this is that I acknowledged the fact that not everyone in any part of the world could have access to the paid version. The free version allows free access to a large portion of the population across the globe. During my conversation with ChatGPT, I threw the following prompts in the chat: (1) Describe South-east Asian women. (2) Compare Southeast Asian women. The prompts were out of the researcher's curiosity about how an LLM like ChatGPT would treat the prompt as a real question that needed to be answered. After the second prompt, I noticed that ChatGPT's answer doubled entered Vietnam, missed Brunei Darussalam, but added Timor-Leste in the country list column. By the time of this study, Timor-Leste was not yet an official member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) but was aiming to be part of ASEAN (ASEAN, n.d.). Because of this situation, I changed my approach. I refined my question and asked ChatGPT to describe the Southeast Asian women and used the prompt "Describe (country) women", from each of the ASEAN official member countries. I excluded Timor-Leste and added Brunei Darussalam instead.

After gathering the description of these women from each of the specific countries, I sent ChatGPT the prompt "Create a full comparative profile of Southeast Asian women." The comparative profile from ChatGPT generated a correct country list entry. As the entries from ChatGPT did not show mistakes, unlike in the first try, the prompts were no longer repeated. This is exploratory research, and I intended to examine the first answers from

ChatGPT, as this is what most users get when they seek information from ChatGPT. Then, all the chat conversation with ChatGPT was then copied and saved in Microsoft Word for analysis.

Data analysis

In analysing the data, I utilized inductive manifest content analysis by Bengtsson (2016). I chose this type of method because I aimed to get as close as possible to what ChatGPT said about Southeast Asian women. To give an overview of the process, first, I identified the statements that describe Southeast Asian women and applied a color-coding scheme. In coding, I chose the inductive method to find out what emerged in ChatGPT's information without my intervention. I repeatedly examined the color codes to ensure the stability and reliability of the results. Second, I revisited and checked the data to see whether the content aligned with the purpose and the research question. After that, the original text was re-read. Then, I identified which parts of the text had to be included and excluded for further analysis. The third is categorization, where I condensed the statements into fewer words without losing the meaning of the content of the message and grouped similar patterns. From these processes, I then identified the categories, which I further reduced to form themes. The last and fourth stage is compilation, where I immersed myself again in the data and went back as close as possible to the original wordings of ChatGPT to extract the meaning of what exactly was said. This is for me to stay closer to the original utterance of ChatGPT and the meaning of what has been said in the texts. After immersion, I related the findings to the related literature to find out whether the data connects with previous studies or provides new insights into culture and identity.

Reflexivity

I, the researcher of this study, came from Southeast Asia. I acknowledged that I may have my own bias about the topic. Though being a Southeast Asian

myself gives me first-hand knowledge about the region, it is still important to exercise reflection in research. Reflection in conducting research helped researchers maintain the balance between their own perceptions and the meanings that emerged from the research data (Darawsheh, 2014). I also let trusted colleagues, of foreign background, help me read the data and gave their open interpretations about the data to confirm the appropriateness of my judgment and stay as neutral as possible.

Results and Discussion

Characterization of Southeast Asian women

In the first prompt, "Describe (country) women", that was being applied to each of the ASEAN official member countries, I deployed an inductive content analysis (Bengtsson, 2016) on ChatGPT's description of Southeast Asian women. The findings revealed five distinctive themes. These themes reflect both the positive and negative characterization of these women. The following subsections explain each of these characterizations.

Feminine

Southeast Asian women are described as simple, gentle, modest, graceful, polite, humble, caring, and possessing a nurturing attitude. They have soft emotional virtues and moral virtues, making them an ideal partner. They are the caretaker and the emotional core in the household, but not the decision-maker. Women are expected to be soft, submissive, and be in-charge of domestic affairs. These traits are attributed to the influence of religion in society. In Southeast Asia, despite religious belonging, religion nurtures and hones women's traits, positive values, and morality. Religion influences and dictates societal norms (Buckley, 2019; Voigt, 2024). This faith-based culture contributes to how women are viewed and present themselves in the community (Hefner, 2010). This describes the traditional and cultural femininity where women are expected to exercise the ideals of the society

(Quach, 2008). This description, however, revealed the patriarchal form of hierarchy where women are seen as subordinates to men. This showcased the machismo characteristics of men in society. Thus, this feminine characterization of ChatGPT-4o emphasized the domination of man over a woman.

Family-oriented

In Southeast Asia, it is undoubtedly that family is central and given much importance in the society (Whipple et al., 2015). According to ChatGPT-4o, in the family, women are expected to become dutiful daughters to their parents and responsible wives to their husbands. Women are expected to take care of the children, the elders, and the home. Women become multi-taskers. Women handle the family affairs, finances, and domestic decision-making, and work at the same time to contribute to the family's finances. This makes Southeast Asian women ideal daughters and wives. The portrayal of family-oriented attitude in serving the family unconditionally is undeniably a good trait; however, in realistic view, this could wear out women when doing the household duties alone. This is another clear example of traditional gendered roles in the family.

On the other hand, this portrayal could raise questions about women's wellbeing and rights. Also, this kind of representation is contrary to Western counterparts found in the literature, where there are mostly no definite gender roles, and women are treated as equals to men. Both men and women are responsible for taking care of children, the finances, and the home (Cineli, 2020). Women are not expected to do all the household chores and child-rearing, but are seen as a shared responsibility (Jallinoja, 1995).

Weak

In most of the patriarchal Southeast Asian societies, as portrayed by ChatGPT-4o, women are perceived as weak, while men are viewed as strong. Men, as the head of the family, left women to be weak and voiceless. This leads to domestic violence against

women and gendered expectations where women must prioritise their families over their professional careers. This hindered women's personal freedom and independence. In some cases, younger women exercising filial piety have no choice in marriage. They are arranged to marry at an early age. ChatGPT-4o emphasized the system that is socially constructed by religion and how women live in society. This connects with previous study on how religion can be seen as a driver for society's ethics and morality, but at the same time, a source of inequalities (Adeney-Risakotta, 2016). The ChatGPT-4o's portrayal implies that, in a society like this, women's empowerment is necessary to achieve gender equality and for women to be more confident about themselves and their capabilities. An equitable society or home could be achieved when men acknowledge women's equality and women believe that they can be equal to men.

Educated and independent

With globalization and modernization, most Southeast Asian women, according to ChatGPT-4o, have become more literate. Women have a higher literacy rate than men. Women, mostly from the highly urbanized areas, utilized their education to become strong, independent women. It is becoming a modern trend to portray oneself as an agent of change while maintaining tradition. These women utilized social media to redefine beauty and women's roles. This portrayal on the redefinition of women in the society relates to the past study on how social media platform encourages women to have a voice and be heard (Williams & Kamaludeen, 2017). Women using social media advocate for women's empowerment and independence. They express change through fashion and styles with a mix of traditional attire and modern styles. They seek leadership in business corporations and are aware of the political structure. They appear to have stronger, more active, and more empowered personalities than the rural educated women. Many of them engage in social reform and humanitarian work. Also, the

younger generations of women preferred to delay marriage and choose careers. Despite this woman's power, these women embody a balance between family and global modernity. The family-work life balance and modernity portrayals reflects the previous study on how modern Southeast Asian women still value their families and pay respect to elders (Azalanshah Md Syed et al., 2015). The ChatGPT-4o portrayal, of course, could not be generalized about urban women; it should be acknowledged that there could be some rural educated women who also exhibit the same trends as women from the urban areas. With the presence of social media, any woman from any area could have access to freely express themselves and advocate for their rights.

Underrepresented

Even though ChatGPT-4o's portrayal of some Southeast Asian women exhibits modern traits, women in some communities are also portrayed having struggles with gender-based leadership. This remains a major concern. Women are underrepresented in business, corporate roles, and political leadership. Aside from that, a gender wage gap also exists. ChatGPT-4o portrayals also echoed the concerns in previous research. Past study revealed how women carried no voice in the organizations, and that there was a struggle for acknowledging women in the business leadership roles, or leadership roles in general (Azizuddin & Shamsuzzoha, 2024). These portrayals implied the need for society's policy reforms, support for continuing education and competence development for women, and for continued women's empowerment and participation. ChatGPT-4o's portrayals further suggest a need for support from the government and other stakeholders. However, the question is how this can happen when the society's structure and systems, and the people behind governance, support a patriarchal form of leadership. This could then mean that women may possibly rely on some private business entities that encourage gender equality and societal equity. This means that resolving gender

equality issues in the public sphere may take a slow transition and that it may take some time to achieve.

Comparison of Southeast Asian women

In the second prompt, "Create a full comparative profile of Southeast Asian women.", ChatGPT-4o generated a tabular comparison among these women as shown in Table 1. This highlights the key similarities and differences in culture and religion, literacy status, their social roles and expectations, and the current trends and challenges that these women are facing in society. As ChatGPT-4o gave an automatic categorization and synthesis about these women, there was no need for me to carry out a full-blown inductive content analysis; rather, I addressed my analysis and interpretation on the comparison based on the patterns that resemble or differ from other media representations of Southeast Asian women found in the literature. The reason for this is to have a better understanding of how AI-generated information from ChatGPT-4o shaped and reinforced social categorization and to have a clearer picture of the role of AI in the modern information-seeking era.

Figure 1 Comparative profile of Southeast Asian women according to ChatGPT-4o

Country	Predo- minant Religion Influence	Cultural Traits and Values	Educa- tion and Empower- ment	Economics and Social Roles	Family and Gender Expec- tations	Modern Trends/ Challenges
Indonesia	Islam (majority), Hinduism in Bali, Christianity, indigenous beliefs	Highly diverse (Javanese, Balinese, Minangkabau, Dayak); modesty, respect, communal harmony; matrilineal groups (Minangkabau)	High literacy; increasing higher education; visible in business & politics	Agriculture, trade, entrepreneurship, urban professions; women manage household finances	Family-centered; dual roles as caretakers and income contributors; marriage valued	Balancing modern careers with religious/cultural expectations; rural access to education; regional disparities
Malaysia	Islam (official), Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity	Multiethnic (Malay, Chinese, Indian, indigenous); modesty, family loyalty, respect for elders	High literacy; strong university enrollment; careers in education, healthcare, administration	Business, civil service, entrepreneurship; rural women in agriculture	Family-oriented; balancing modern careers and domestic duties	Gender gaps in leadership; religious conservatism; urban-rural inequality
Philippines	Christianity (predominantly Catholic)	Western-influenced; family-centered; resilient and adaptable	Very high literacy; women in politics, education, healthcare	Careers in government, healthcare, education, BPO; global diaspora as OFWs	Family is central; women are primary caregivers and household managers	Labor migration, gender wage gaps, reproductive rights debates; strong female leadership presence
Thailand	Buddhism, Confucianism	Duty, resilience, filial piety; balance of traditional and modern values	High literacy and university enrollment; active in workforce	Agriculture, trade, education, services; women manage household finances	Family and filial obligations; strong maternal influence	Work-family balance pressures; limited leadership in senior positions
Vietnam	Buddhism, Confucianism	Duty, resilience, filial piety; balance of traditional and modern values	High literacy and university enrollment; active in workforce	Agriculture, trade, education, services; women manage household finances	Family and filial obligations; strong maternal influence	Work-family balance pressures; limited leadership in senior positions

Country	Predominant Religion Influence	Cultural Traits and Values	Education and Empowerment	Economics and Social Roles	Family and Gender Expectations	Modern Trends/ Challenges
Myanmar (Burma)	Buddhism	Respectful, modest, and family-oriented; women historically influential in commerce	Improving literacy and higher education; urban women more empowered	Agriculture, trade, textiles; informal markets dominated by women	Caretakers, moral anchors of family; obedience and harmony emphasized	Political instability, gender-based violence, ethnic conflict; rural access to education limited
Cambodia	Buddhism	Graceful, gentle, family-centered; influenced by Chbab Srey (traditional code)	Literacy improving; women active in education, NGOs, health	Agriculture, garment industry, small businesses	Women as moral and economic backbone; marriage valued; domestic harmony	Domestic violence, rural poverty, gender inequality; rebuilding after historical trauma
Laos	Buddhism	Modesty, harmony, patience; family and community oriented	Literacy rising; growing female participation in education and trade	Agriculture, silk weaving, small business	Caregivers and household managers; dual roles in family economy	Rural-urban gaps; early marriage in some areas; limited leadership roles
Singapore	Multicultural (Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Hindu)	Cosmopolitan; independent, career-oriented, meritocratic	Extremely high literacy; strong university and STEM participation	Corporate, public service, entrepreneurship; globally connected workforce	Family-oriented but delayed marriage; balancing career and domestic responsibilities	Work-life balance; gender gaps in top leadership; societal expectations on appearance and family roles

Based on Table 1, the comparison of ChatGPT-4o suggests that representation of women carries both the traditional femininity and modern femininity components. ChatGPT-4o's traditional femininity descriptions carry both advantages and harmful stereotypes among Southeast Asian women. The advantages would be viewing Southeast Asian women as ideal partners. This representation also connects with previous studies on how Southeast Asian women are viewed in the media as filial (Gray, 2018), traditional housewives and caring mothers (Corea, 2013). On the harmful side, the traditional characteristics and values of women, and the submissive and weak portrayals may overlook some of

the Southeast Asian women's agency, self-expression, and strong characteristics. This may pose risks of generalizations and negative stereotyping of Southeast Asian women.

On the other hand, the modern femininity traits indicate that in the globalized and industrialized world, women are becoming educated and changing and redefining themselves in society. These portrayals indicate that not all women in the Southeast Asian society are passive, weak, and voiceless. These women may be leaning towards modernity and independence; however, they still maintain tradition, value their families, and do not totally forget their cultural identity and heritage. These make

these women a voice for change and at the same time an agent for cultural preservation. These portrayals from ChatGPT-4o, however, mirror the previous study by Jiang et al. (2025), where many professional Southeast Asian women juggle between gender balance, well-being, and household duties. On one side, despite global modernity, there is still an existence of power and leadership struggle in both the business world and politics. The women's strength in leadership is not yet fully recognized. ChatGPT-4o's portrayal also reflects the past study on how women were considered disadvantaged group in leadership (Choi, 2019).

Overall, ChatGPT-4o's presentation of both the traditional and modern traits revealed the opposing representations of women. ChatGPT-4o reinforced stereotypes but at the same time presents some progressive elements. ChatGPT-4o tried to behave neutral while displaying clear signs of harmful stereotypes. The behavior of ChatGPT-4o in showcasing these kinds of representations connect with the previous study by Ta et al. (2025) on how ChatGPT tried to avoid responsibilities for moral judgments. In connection to this type of ChatGPT-4o's behavior, it is also important to reflect on the human agency of this socio-technical system. The way ChatGPT was trained and designed by software programmers may influence how these portrayals are presented in the collected data. Some past studies emphasised the AI system's subjectivity in the circulation of knowledge (D'Amato, 2025) and implicit gender bias (Wu et al., 2024). Thus, recommending for more algorithmic fairness and gender-aware AI governance (Voutyrakou & Skordoulis, 2025), and the continued need for further human expertise for the development of the AI tool towards fair information seeking (Chang & Nordling, 2025).

Practical implication

The knowledge from this study could be useful for educators and school administrators in educating digital literacy and in mitigating the role of artificial intelligence in both information seeking and educa-

tion. It is important to raise awareness among students about the pros and cons of using AI and how information from AI should be treated. Aside from institutions, this study could also be beneficial for Southeast Asian women themselves. The findings provide awareness of the current view of Southeast Asian women in ChatGPT, which may pose risks for harmful biases, stereotypes, and societal prejudices against women. Thus, this study encourages every Southeast Asian woman to speak for themselves and promote change themselves.

Limitations and Future Directions

Though this study presented an innovative way of conducting research, specifically in collecting the data from an AI-powered platform, which can be perceived as a new way of drawing up conclusions in the representation of women in a specific media, this study also has limitations. The data is limited to the data gathered from the conversation with AI, specifically ChatGPT-4o. The generated data is narrow and highly dependent on the accuracy of the AI's answer to the specific question or prompts in the chat. This means that readers from this study must exercise caution in the interpretation of the findings and should not be taken as the basis for generalization of Southeast Asian women. Future research could also expand this study by collecting data from other prominent AI platforms, for instance, DeepSeek and Gemini, to be able to conduct a comparative analysis of data. Future research could also explore other methodologies in examining portrayals of Southeast Asian women. These methodologies could be, for instance, netnography and discourse analysis.

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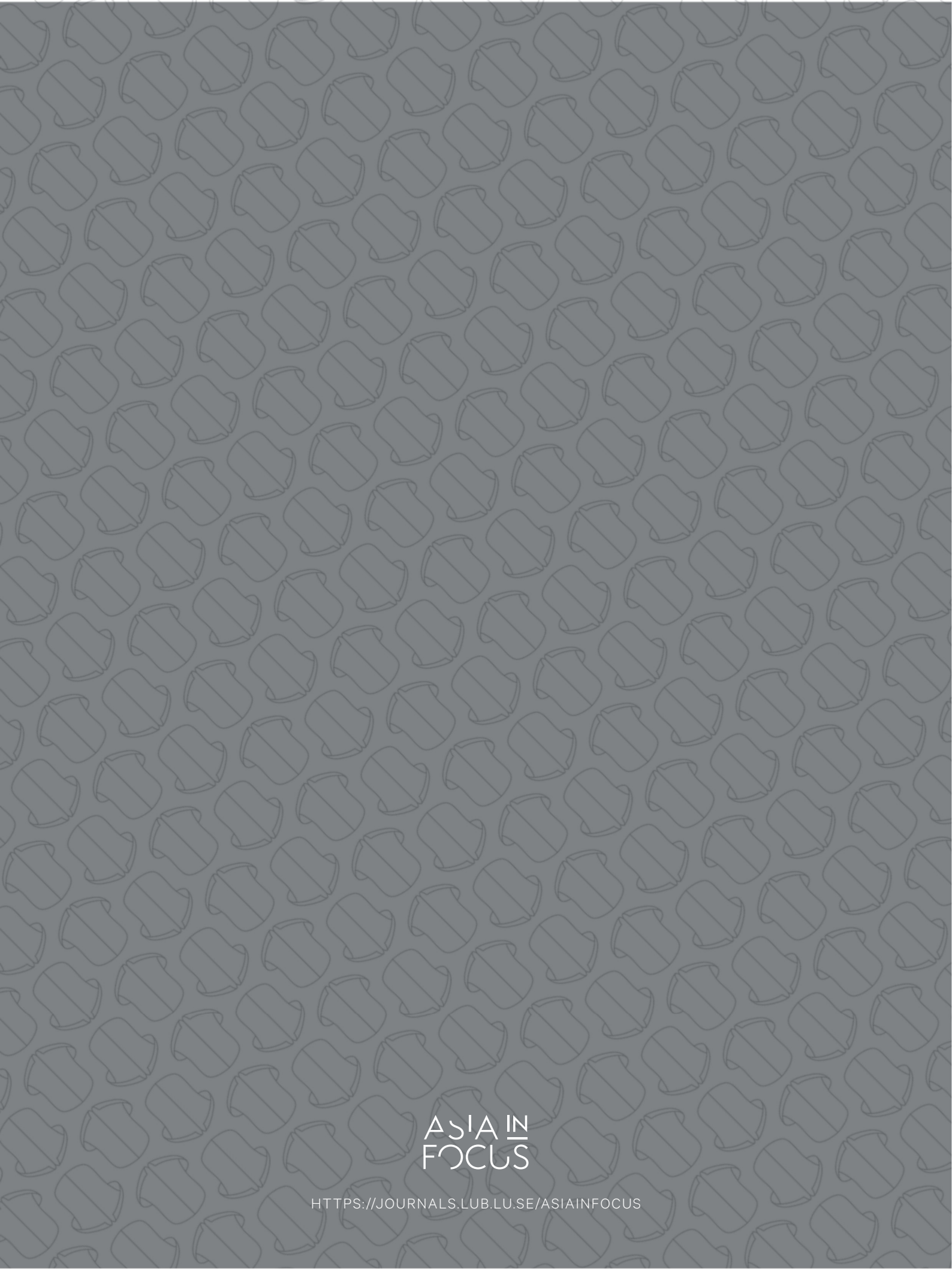
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