

#MeToo Movement and The Potentiality of Feminist Digital Activism against Sexual Harassment in Vietnam

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In this article, I examine the development of the #MeToo movement in Vietnam between April and May 2018. By analyzing the online discourses and the Facebook data regarding several cases of sexual harassment against female professionals, I want to demonstrate how Vietnamese netizens utilized social media to voice their opinions and collectively raise awareness about the issue. The article also discusses the potentiality and the downfall of social media as a tool for feminist digital activism.

Keywords: #metoo movement, digital activism, social movement, Vietnam

In April 2018, the #MeToo movement witnessed a new development in Vietnam, as a number of journalists shared a Facebook post on allegations of sexual harassment against a supervising editor in a famous local newspaper. It was later followed by three other women with accusations against a famous rock singer. Each case invoked more people joining to support these victims and sharing their own experience about sexual harassment, using hashtags such as #MeToo, #toasoansach (English: clean newsroom), #ngungimlang (English: stop staying silent) on Facebook. One can observe the role social media plays in this, which leads to the question of whether such an event signifies the potentiality of social media in the battle against sexual harassment in Vietnam.

Sexual harassment has remained a sensitive issue in Vietnam, mostly due to the gender or social roles assigned to women, as well as the norms and perceptions about male and female sexuality in societies (Hasper N. et al, 2001). In the workplace, unwanted touching and inappropriate jokes regarding female body parts and sex are considered acceptable, and the victims are expected to keep silent. Reports against sexual harassment have appeared on newspapers and other media before, however, none managed to sustain public attention. Meanwhile, the booming internet usage and the ascendancy of social media over recent years in Vietnam have gradually changed the public sphere for citizens, or 'netizens', who are concerned with controversial issues, even sensitive topics, and want to raise their voice about this. As regards feminist digital activism, research has shown that online platforms as Facebook or Twitter provide participants in feminist activism such as #MeToo a safer and easier place to be engaged in public debates on sexual assault harassment, to connect and receive support for their views, as well as to generate solidarity in calling out rape culture (Mendes, K. et al., 2018).

Originally, the phrase Me Too was first used by women's rights activist Tarana Burke in 2006. On 24 October 2017, hashtag #MeToo started spreading on Twitter, largely due to a Twitter post of actress Alyssa Milana about allegations of sexual assault by the famous producer Harvey Weinstein.

Various posts with the same hashtag quickly followed this, which proliferated into a movement in America. Other countries, including some in Asia, also picked up the momentum. At the moment the hashtag became trending on social platforms, feminists and netizens in Vietnam also shared their own stories about horrible encounters with sexual harassment perpetrators; however, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, it was not until April 2014 that the movement received widespread attention. The journalist who allegedly assaulted an intern is revealed to be Dang Anh Tuan, head of the newspaper Tuoi Tre's TV department. After being suspended from work, he resigned and also denied all accusations. Subsequently, many women, particularly female journalists decided to tell their own encounters on Facebook, exposing the dark side of their workplace. It is worth noticing that among the Facebook comments made on the event, some noticeably turned against the assaulted intern, claiming that she must be responsible for what happened. This exemplifies a complicated facet of feminist digital activism: online vitriol can be distributed easily and deems participants vulnerable to attacks on social media.

While the first case was made notorious within the journalism circle, the second one occurring in May 2018 provoked a more serious public outcry. When his actions were exposed to the public, the famous singer Pham Anh Khoa first denied and even threatened to sue his first accuser. Other victims, probably stimulated by Khoa's aggressive actions, came forward with allegations against his behavior. Khoa made a public apology on 15 May 2018 in a talk held with the Center for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender-Family-Women & Adolescents (CSAGA). However, his words were widely considered as insincere and unacceptable, since he still claimed that no sexual harassment was made and only hurtful words were being said. To make everything worse, he even found excuses for his action:

"It's normal for people who have a quite close connection to tap each other's buttocks in the showbiz environment. It was like greeting in a working place", Khoa said.

In line with these two events, data regarding interactions on Facebook has been calculated. The result is depicted in the diagram below:



Figure 1. Interaction Index of Facebook Posts with Hashtag #Metoo in Vietnam, March-May 2018

Source: generated by the author

His statement leads to displeased reactions from other Vietnamese artists and celebrities. Facebook users also scrutinized his apology on 15 May 2018 and left infuriating comments on CSAGA's fan page, where the video on Khoa's press conference was released. This video was quickly removed within the day, which was explained as "due to some issues with the content of the talk". The singer eventually lost his position as a representative campaign, ironically about ending violence against

women and girls by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Vietnam, and his performance for a rock concert was also canceled. However, he has not yet received any due legal process concerning the accusation.

As can be seen, the number of Facebook posts using the hashtag #MeToo soared up at over 400 at the time of the Tuoi Tre event and reached its peak of 557 in the middle of May when the singer Pham Anh Khoa was facing sexual harassment allegations. On the other hand, the interaction figure (the number of likes and shares for posts with the hashtag #MeToo) fluctuated more around the time Khoa's case happened. A plausible explanation for this is that the first was more confined in the media field, whereas the second case involved a famous singer, thus capturing more public attention.

Nonetheless, the number of posts involved in #MeToo seems to remain at the same level before and after the events, which may mean that the likeliness of a thorough campaign for #MeToo is still rather low.

Journalists and feminist writers have attempted to explain the reasons behind this lack of momentum in Vietnam:

"Meanwhile, a UN Women statement from late March also suggests that gender biases prevent rape victims from seeking justice in Vietnam." (Nguyen, T, 2018)

"Vietnamese women and girls who report cases of rape and sexual assault often encounter "significant" barriers in social and institutional bias that prevent them from receiving justice, the U.N. said in research released in March.

Women who report rape in the country do not receive due trust and are often instructed to switch to informal negotiations with the perpetrators instead of pursuing trials, it said." (Minh Nga, 2018)

Besides the sociocultural factor, lack of legal enforcement is also a factor to be taken into account. The term "sexual harassment" was first introduced in the Vietnamese Labor Code in 2012, but a clear definition was not indicated. In 2015, the Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs issued a voluntary code of conduct on sexual harassment in the workplace, but the implementation and monitoring of such code are essentially weak.

One should not forget, however, that the #MeToo movement is fundamentally in the form of feminist digital activism. As Mendes et al. (2018) pointed out, the labor involved in running feminist campaigns like that is more than just coining hashtags and letting the public using them. The founders and members of such campaigns are usually required to invest more effort into it, including writing and participating in media interviews and debates. Perhaps the problem of Vietnam lies here: there has not yet any individuals or organizations step up to officially organize the campaign, establish tangible goals for it, and bear the sheer amount of work needed. Social media is a tool that empowers ordinary citizens and social actors to voice their concerns, but that can only be effective when civil society actors are willing to push their boundaries, to engage in more meaningful participation.

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