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Social Normativity in the Transition of New Media: the Case of Facebook in Vietnam

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Abstract: In recent times, with the prominent emergence of social networks, online cultural and behavioural standards are gradually formed and re-formed in the online sphere, raising the demand to investigate the rules and the development of online social behaviours, as well as the approaches to foster its healthy practice towards cyber civilization. In Vietnam, Facebook is the most popular social media platform, posing as an important space for online discussions and social relations in Vietnam's cyberspace. Therefore, this study aims to examine how normativity and netiquette are reflected on Facebook, how groups' subculture on Facebook empowers the conformity of users' behaviour, and the current situation of 'Netiquette' and related rules and regulations in Vietnam. The research seeks to understand how social norms are tested and reformed in online social networks, ultimately impacting beliefs and actions both online and offline. Based on the findings, this study proposes additional approaches to promote a behavioural culture and establish standardized user behaviour on social networks.

Keywords: New Media, Facebook, Social normativity, Netiquette.

1. Introduction

Social networks first appeared in 1995, but it was not until 2006 that the birth of Facebook marked a new turning point for social networks online. Currently, Facebook is the world's most active social media platform with 2.989 billion monthly active users as of April 2023 [1].

Vietnam is now a rising country of digital usage with 77.93 million internet users in Vietnam among a total population of 98.53 million at the start of 2023. According to DataReportal, Facebook is still the leading social platform in Vietnam, followed by numerous other platforms such as Zalo, Tiktok, Facebook Messenger and Instagram. Facebook had a user base of 66.20

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million in Vietnam at the beginning of 2023 [2]. In January 2023, Statista's latest report revealed that Vietnam ranked 7th globally in terms of Facebook users. The popularity of Facebook among Vietnamese users is evident as approximately 93% of internet surfers in Vietnam use the platform on a monthly basis [3]. With the prominence of Facebook in Vietnam, the network is becoming a significant sphere for social discussion and public opinion interchange.

In this study, the focus will be on how Facebook might be *"a site of normativity and netiquette"*, as discussed by Daniel Miller (2011) *"The use of Facebook often reflects pre-existing modes of normative control"* [4], therefore, different groups of users may have different norms and may be quite explicit about them. Meanwhile, the influence of social networking content and perceived social norms on Facebook news feeds and friends' profiles has been found to impact people's attitudes and behaviours [5]. This suggests a two-way relationship between users and social networks: while users express themselves online, social networks concurrently influence their perception, opinions and beliefs. As social norms are among core elements of each society, to study these norms in the transition of media with online social networks would be an appropriate and promising approach.

The research's main focus is to examine how social norms are tested and reformed in online social networks, affecting people's beliefs and actions in both online and offline spheres. Based on this premise, the research suggests some approaches to foster the growth of behavioral culture and establish standardized user behaviour on social networks.

2. The Power of Conformity and Subculture

2.1. Subculture and Nettiquettes in Online Facebook Groups

Facebook Group is a salient feature of Facebook that initiates and facilitates the formation of group culture or subculture. "Culture is the learned, shared behaviour of members of society. It includes norms – accepted and expected ways of behaving; values – beliefs about what is worth having and worth striving for; and roles – the parts people play in society" [6].

Subcultures, in particular, are "those groups that have values and norms that are distinct from those held by the majority and are held by a group within a wider society" [7]. Successful groups with large numbers of members and regular active conversations often have their own distinct cultures. The netiquette required in such groups is also in accordance with its culture, and members of the group must comply with such rules, written or non-written, in order to join the activities and conversations there. Moreover, to follow the netiquette of the group is a must for the user's sense of belonging towards the group and for the respect from other members.

"Nghien nha" – a popular Facebook Group about family and lifestyle has successfully gained over 2 million members in just one year during the Covid pandemic. Currently having over 2.4 million members, it is a common place where home enthusiasts can showcase their homes, share their living spaces, and demonstrate their personal style and experiences related to home decor and other aspects of home life. It is also a community where members can learn from each other and from design experts, allowing them to appreciate and enjoy beautiful designs while satisfying their own aesthetic preferences. With numerous posts attracting thousands of reactions, the group has been a successful case in promoting a prominent culture focusing on home spirits, lifestyles and daily life experiences.

Members of the group often comply willingly with the written and unwritten rules of behaviour in the group, especially to respect others' opinions in case of controversial debates. According to the group founder [8], rules play a crucial role in maintaining order and upholding the community's original goals. By providing a

framework for behaviour, rules ensure that members respect the community's values and contribute to its overall well-being, creating a harmonious and thriving community.

Netiquette, a combination of "network etiquette", refers to the set of social norms and guidelines governing online interactions and behaviour [9]. It incorporates both injunctive and descriptive social norms, influencing how individuals engage with each other on digital platforms such as Facebook [10]. In Facebook groups, the practice of netiquette often relies on the group's rules, its subculture and the administration of the group founding team. For users' willingness to comply with such netiquettes, the power of subculture plays a crucial part in shaping their standards of behaviour.

2.2. Pre-existing Social Norms and the Pressure of Conformity

Social norm, "a shared expectation of behaviour that connotes what is considered culturally desirable and appropriate" [11], often serves as both guides and criticisms for individual behaviour. Studies have also examined the role of social norms in the context of entertainment media selection based on social identity theory and the theory of normative social behaviour [12]. Moreover, social norms affect human behaviour, including underage drinking [13]. The COVID-19 infodemic has also highlighted the contextual dimensions of information on social media, emphasizing the role of normativity in shaping user behaviour [14].

Norms establish expectations that shape interaction. It can be seen in the case of Otofun – a Facebook group (with over 346.000 members as of Dec 2023) for exchanging information related to transportation in Vietnam.

Contents shared in this group comprise of three main categories as follows: i) Exchanging experiences in vehicles and transportation practices in Vietnam; ii) Sharing cases of law violation and controversial behaviours in transportation; and iii) Discussing rules and regulations related to transportation. The opinions shared in these posts are often influenced by users' existing beliefs and their sense of ethics and standards. Conversely, these opinions are reflected in their social content, attracting others who share similar standards, and subsequently influencing other audiences who come across the posts.

The cases of law violation and controversial behaviours posted as videos, images and opinions often attract hundreds to thousands of reactions and comments, showing users' attitude towards the disputed actions. In most cases, online criticism on these posts may not reach the person related to the actual violation, meanwhile, the group pressure helps in forming mutual standards in transportation practices and behaviour in the mindset of the group members.

Social norms are powerful determinants of human behaviours in offline and online social worlds [15]. In the circumstance of transportation in Vietnam, the shortage of comprehensively systematic jurisdiction rather leads to low voluntary legal compliance. Online criticism on Facebook in this case is a highly efficient facilitator in shaping user behaviour. This is the point where Facebook helps increasing "the pressure of conformity" [4].

3. Netiquette and Legal Regulations

3.1. Vietnam's Civilization in Cyberspace

According to the **Cyber Civilization Index (DCI) report** published by Microsoft in 2021, Vietnam is classified as a country with a low level of civilization in cyberspace [16]. The survey also highlights several topics where Vietnamese people often exhibit inappropriate behaviour online. These include romantic relationships, gender, appearance, race, and politics. It is important to note that behaving inappropriately online can be considered a form of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying encompasses actions that harm or harass others using information technology, such as the internet and

social networking sites. This can manifest in various forms, including spreading untruths, false rumors, or posting comments that defame or offend others. Victims of online bullying often experience negative psychological consequences, including anxiety disorders, depression, self-harm, and even suicide. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent among adolescents and young adults, and its prevalence is increasing.

In Vietnam today, there are instances of deviations in online behaviour culture, including the exploitation of social networks to commit acts that violate the law. Recently, social networks have been in the spotlight due to cases where they have been used as a platform for resolving conflicts, exchanging insults, and launching attacks on one another, leading to public frustration. For instance, a group of passionate Vietnamese fans recently targeted the Facebook page of the referee for the World Cup qualifying match between the Vietnamese national team and the United Arab Emirates team, using vulgar and uncultured language. Most recently, a group of Vietnamese fans flooded the Fanpage of the Miss Grand International pageant to launch attacks when the Vietnamese representative did not make it into the Top 10.

Above mentioned incidents indicate a crucial demand to develop social rules and etiquettes in Vietnam's cyberspace, especially on prominent social networks like Facebook.

3.2. The Legal Aspects

The Cybersecurity Law of Vietnam [17], implemented since 2018, prohibits internet users from engaging in actions that humiliate or seriously offend the honor, prestige, and dignity of others. It forbids the dissemination of false and misleading information that may harm the legal rights and interests of individuals and organizations.

In light of this law, Facebook users in Vietnam need to be cautious about their online behaviour. It is important to avoid posting content that could be considered offensive or damaging to others' reputations. Users should verify the accuracy of any information they share to prevent the spread of false or misleading content.

Nonetheless, the practice of this law still faces limitations due to the diverse and ad-hoc nature of social media usage and the large amount of content consumed daily.

In 2021, the Ministry of Information and Communications of Vietnam released Decision 874/QD-BTTTT, prescribing the Code of Conduct on social media [18]. The Code of Conduct for social media in Vietnam aims to promote the development of a healthy social media environment while ensuring personal and business freedom, non-discrimination of suppliers, and adherence to standards, regulations, and international agreements. It also seeks to establish moral standards for social media behaviour, raise awareness, foster positive habits among users, and create a safe and healthy cyberspace in Vietnam. The social media Code of Conduct encompasses guidelines for various entities, including organizations and individuals, officials and public employees, workers in government agencies, regulatory authorities, and social media service providers.

3.3. Promotion of Expected Social Practices

The Cybersecurity Law, The Code of Conduct on social media along with other rules and regulations on cyberspace practices has been widely informed by the authorities since its release. Meanwhile, for the standards to be cultivated efficiently into social media users' practice, it requires more diverse efforts in terms of social-behaviour change communication.

The KAP conceptual framework in Figure 1 shows the model through which practices can be changed by adjusting attitudes through knowledge/awareness. In which, it requires abolishing both internal and external barriers for each person to actively change towards new practices in the proper circumstance.

The rules and regulations may act as crucial factors to enforce the expected practice of

civilized behaviour on social networks. Meanwhile, to promote a person's willingness to actively comply with such social standards in the ever-changing cyberspace, the internal barriers should be further altered via group conformity and the cultivation of new social norms through cultural aspects. The pressure of group conformity may also act as a source of motivation for social media users to adapt to behavioural standards.

This suggests further KAP-based researches should be conducted to provide deeper understanding of the current KAP situation of Vietnam social media users in terms of behavioural culture on social media. Therefore, strategically oriented communication could be employed to effectively cultivate proper social standards in different groups of social media users, in accordance with the Code of Conduct on social media and other related rules and regulations.
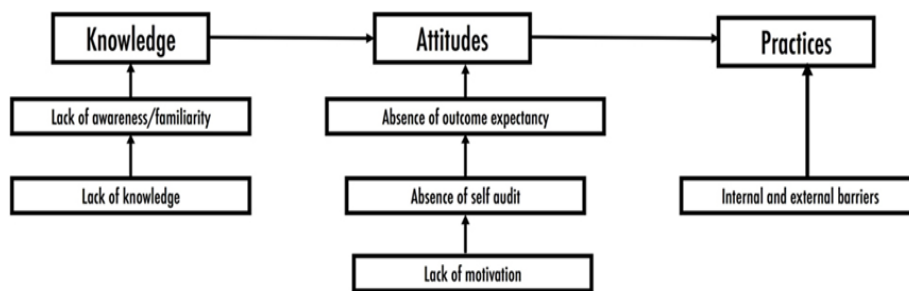

Figure 1. A conceptual framework of the knowledge, attitude, and practice (KAP) [19].

4. Conclusion and Further Recommendations

In conclusion, the normativity of social standards on social media is often powered by diverse factors: the power of conformity, the pressure of group subculture; and rules and regulations clearly established as guidelines for social practices. The relationship between users and social networks is reciprocal: as users express themselves online, social networks simultaneously shape their perceptions, opinions, and beliefs, thus forming and altering the social normativity of social media users. The social behavioural standard is an active factor in the process, as well as an affected aspect of this progression.

The established regulations play an important role in ensuring that the desired behavioural standards are upheld on social media platforms. Meanwhile, for further applications of social behavioural standards on social media, it requires a combination of additional efforts.

Additional approaches to standardize user behaviour on social networks are suggested below:

Encouraging expected behaviour via communication campaigns

Through interactive social communication campaigns focusing on the impact and the importance of treating others with respect, the authorities may fuel social media users with proper knowledge and trigger their motivation to adapt to standardized behaviour.

Community Engagement

Another important aspect is community engagement. Involving users in the decision-making process and seeking their input on related policies may create a sense of ownership and shared responsibility. The active involvement in the making of social standards may enhance the application of such standards in users' practice. This can be done through surveys, focus groups, and other forms of user feedback.

Open Dialogue and Reporting Mechanisms

Fostering open dialogue with constructive discussions is essential for creating a safe and respectful online environment. Additionally, providing resources and platforms for users to report cases of misconduct and addressing them promptly is essential. This will help maintain trust and ensure that appropriate actions are taken when necessary.

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