USES OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO PROMOTE ASEAN SOCIO-CULTURAL COMMUNITY IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

The global openness of Vietnam brought out very fast major social changes. The country is a party to a number of international economic agreements and frameworks including World Trade Organization, Trans Pacific Partnership as well as ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations). External economic factors such as those associated with South East Asian integration are coupled with ASEAN’s ambition to set up a socio-cultural community in addition to the economic community. In the meantime, the popularity of social media is rapidly growing in Vietnam with more than 30 million Vietnamese Facebook accounts. Considering these 2 major influences, ie social media and regional integration efforts, this article proposes a number of recommendations to use social media to promote ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

Keywords: Social media, Vietnam, Facebook, ASEAN and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

INTRODUCTION

The use of social media, especially Facebook is getting more and more common in Vietnam. Positive, negative and mixed impacts over the society are observed. On the other hand, major social and economic developments are expected in Vietnam as a result of ASEAN membership, the union which aims to integrate South East Asian economies as well as societies. So far, ASEAN’s integration focus was more on economic issues, but its ambitions exceed the ‘economy only’ option to move towards an integrated socio-cultural community in the near future. Thus, this article presents a review of the most common uses of social media in Vietnam followed by an overview of ASEAN socio-cultural community to provide the background for relevant recommendations.

INTERNET PROFILE OF VIETNAM

In Vietnam, not surprisingly, rural-urban divide in technology use is wide. Urban residents are more likely to own a TV, mobile phone, radio, telephone land line, computer and internet at their household (BBG, 2016a). The difference is larger for

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computers and internet but not mobile phones, which might be explained by the fact that mobile communication became an indispensable part of Vietnamese daily life in urban as well as rural areas.

Mobile phone ownership follows an education pattern, where almost all the university graduates own a mobile phone with high school and secondary school graduates scoring high on this indicator (BBG, 2016a). Furthermore, mobile phone ownership peaks in the 25-34 age group with almost all owning a mobile, and high in 15-24 age group and 35-54 age group, while declining sharply by 55+ age group (BBG, 2016a; Moore Corporation, 2016). Nearly half of 55+ don’t own a mobile phone in Vietnam. Overall, among the mobile phone owners which is nearly 80% of the population, internet-enabled mobile phone owners are nearly 1/3 of the mobile phone owners. In other words, 1/4 of the Vietnamese population owns a smart phone and this can be expected to increase rapidly by the attraction of the services and more affordable models.

58% of the total population in Vietnam can be designated as digital natives (ie. 0-34 age group) and the rest (35+) are conceptualized as digital migrants (Moore Corporation, 2016). Nearly half of the Vietnamese mobile phone users are using a smart phone according to another source (Moore Corporation, 2016). This rate is lower compared to Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia and China, but higher compared to Thailand, Indonesia and India (Moore Corporation, 2016). 44% of Vietnamese population are estimated to be internet users and mobile phone penetration is very high (Moore Corporation, 2016). Vietnam spends more time on laptop and tablets than the global average (Moore Corporation, 2016). The peak time for internet access by desktop, laptop and smart phones are found to be 20:00-22:00 while for the tablet access it is slightly earlier (Moore Corporation, 2016). If we go into details, this is the peak time for social media use, checking online news and online videos as well as internet TV and online shopping. On the other hand, the trough time is from 22:00 to 09:00 (Moore Corporation, 2016).

Online activities of age groups do differ: 15-24 age group accesses internet for the following activities, ordered in terms of frequency with top three as the most common: Chat, visiting social network, e-mail, study related browsing, reading newspapers, general news updates, work related browsing, downloading music, playing game online, reading magazines, watching/downloading movies, sports news/info, downloading games, fashion/style, entertainment/lifestyle, reading blogs, technology news and online photo albums. 25-34 age group accesses internet for the following activities, again ordered in terms of frequency, with top three as the most common: E-mail, chat, reading newspapers, general news updates, visiting social networking, work related browsing, sports news/info, study related browsing, reading magazines, business news, downloading music, entertainment/lifestyle, playing game online, financial news, technology news, watching/downloading movies, reading blogs, fashion/style and looking for navigation/direction. Finally, 35-45 age group accesses internet for the following activities, ordered in terms of frequency, with top three as the most common: Reading newspaper, general news update, work related browsing, email, chat, reading magazines, visiting social networking, sports news/info,
entertainment/lifestyle, financial news, business news, study related browse, technology news, playing game online, downloading music, watching/downloading movies, fashion/style, downloading music and looking for navigation/direction (Moore Corporation, 2016).

THE USES OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN VIETNAM

Facebook and Zing Me (often considered to be the Vietnamese version of Facebook) are the most common social media platforms in Vietnam. Twitter, Linkedin, Instagram and Pinterest uses are notable, but not as high as the first two (Moore Corporation, 2016). Vietnam has more than 30 million Facebook users dominated by 15-24 age group, followed by 25-34 and 35-49 age groups. More than a million Vietnamese 13-15 year olds own their own Facebook account, while Facebook account ownership is negligible in 50+ age groups (Moore Corporation, 2016). The largest cities of Vietnam, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City host nearly 7 million Facebook users. In another survey, Google, Facebook and Youtube topped the most frequently visited websites list in the stated order followed by Zing me, Zalo and Yahoo! with 15-24 age group leading in all 6 websites (BBG, 2016b). The top list was identical for mobile users rather than internet users in general, with the exception of Yahoo! which is relatively weaker in mobile world compared to others. However TV is still the number one source of news for all age groups, while 15-24 age group tops those who are following news on internet and on mobile apps the most in addition to TV (BBG, 2016b).

On the positive side, Facebook has been instrumental for e-commerce activities by local and international companies active in Vietnam. Vietjet, Vietnam’s leading low-cost airlines, for example, was listed among world’s top airlines brands on Facebook according to a sponsored content on Thanh Nien News (Thanh Nien News, 2015d). As another positive point, Nghiem, Webb & Carrasco (2012) briefly discusses the use of social media to protect wild life in Vietnam, where social media acts as a vigilante conservationist force exposing or complaining about wild life trade. Converging with this point, Vietnamese Facebook accounts advertising wild life products caught the attention of relevant authorities and the owners have consequently been fined (Duc, 2016a; Duc & Cuong, 2016a). Likewise Vietnamese online traders of endangered species were arrested (Thanh Nien News, 2015a), as well as mass slaughter suspects of wild animals by the complaints of relevant NGOs (Duc, 2016b; Duc & Cuong, 2016b; Hoan, 2016) which may show how social media helped to track down self-described environmental crimes. Facebook posts have also helped to rescue a Vietnamese human trafficking victim in a particular case (Thanh Nien News, 2015e).

In a mixed case, a Vietnamese entrepreneur set up a restaurant mainly funded by contributions from Facebook users, but when she used the slogan “the first restaurant built on Facebook” on her promotional materials, she was threatened by Facebook for lawsuit, since it was claimed that it would lead to the false impression that Facebook company sponsored or supported that business (Hieu, 2014). This is reported to be a
successful restaurant business which could well be listed under positive impacts of Facebook. That is, this shows that Facebook was used at least once for successfully funding a business in Vietnam.

Moving to the dark side, posting nude photos of ex-girlfriends was another news about how Facebook negatively affected the society (Thanh Nien News, 2016a). A similar case led to suicide of a Vietnamese school girl (Lam, 2015). Secondly, Facebook has been reported to be a platform for money swindling by fake Miss Vietnam accounts to sign advertising contracts in real life (Huy, 2015a), for faking the identity of a student studying abroad to receive large sums of money from his family (An, 2015; Huy, 2015b; Le, 2015), for love scams (Thanh Nien News, 2015b), for phone card scams (Uyen, 2015), for promotion scams (Thanh Nien New, 2015i) etc. Thirdly, a Vietnamese nurse that asked patients to wait for a long time to check her Facebook was under investigation (Long, 2015), and a kindergarten teacher was dismissed due to ‘abusive’ Facebook comments about the children as reported by the parents (Thanh Nien News, 2015c). In a similar case with a twist, the photos of a hospital staff watching movie on her mobile phone and ignoring the patients were posted on Facebook which led to her dismissal (Thanh Nien News, 2015h). Fourthly, online fight among a number of Vietnamese Facebook users was transferred to real life with a modern version of duel (Huy & Tien, 2015). In a similar case, a group of Vietnamese school girls who shared the video of how they beat one of their schoolmates were fined (Thanh Nien News, 2015f). In another case, a Facebook row led to murder of a Vietnamese teenager by other teenagers (Ha, 2014); and in separate cases, a Vietnamese user confessed on Facebook that he killed his wife and another user confessed to kill his ex-girlfriend (Le, 2014; Thanh Nien News, 2014a; 2014b). Two Facebook users spreading sex-related shocking fake posts to attract more clicks for Google Ads were arrested (Thanh Nien News, 2015g). Deliberately made-up stories spread on Facebook as rumors led to fines and arrests when they were found to be in clash with Vietnamese public law in a number of cases such as fake accident news, fake new species news, fake health news etc. (Hang, 2014a; Nam, 2014; Phuc, 2015). Facebook is also known as a platform to organize and promote motorbike racing on express ways which are illegal due to public order concerns without official permission in Vietnam (Truong & Vien, 2015). Facebook friendship and messaging also led to sex trade, sex-related crimes, robbery and baby kidnapping in Vietnam (Hang, 2014b; Long & Truong, 2014; Thanh Nien News, 2014). Looking at this long list of troubles, it appears that Facebook was mostly detrimental for Vietnamese society, while potential positive uses such as for educational purposes have not been really considered.

Compared to Facebook, Twitter’s impact on Vietnamese social life is quite limited; in fact, it is difficult to identify any scholarly source that discusses Twitter in Vietnam in detail. Almost same holds for Youtube, although Vietnam is said to be one of the global top 10 in Youtube viewing (Thanh Nien News, 2015j). A number of issues have been raised such as copyright violations, insults and obscene contents on Youtube (Thanh Nien News, 2015k; 2014d; 2014e), but the social impact of Youtube viewership in Vietnam is an uncharted territory. In cases of social debates originating from Youtube, it has been observed that Youtube is considered to be a visual content host
to be transmitted by social media sites, especially Facebook, rather than Youtube per se. In other words, although Youtube viewership is very common in Vietnam, it is not considered to be a social media. The number of active Youtube user accounts is disproportionately low compared to the prevalence of viewership. Technically speaking, producing a mobile video and sharing it on Facebook as a video is faster and easier compared to uploading it to Youtube and then posting it on Facebook as a Youtube video. Youtube video making appears to be more of a desktop business, while Vietnamese netizens are mostly mobile.

Linkedin is getting more popular among Vietnamese professionals and expat professionals working in Vietnam for networking, sharing information and posting and finding jobs. Linkedin hosts profiles of well-known global companies operating in Vietnam such as PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), IBM, CapitaLand, Savills, Vietnam Airlines etc. However, Vietnamworks.com is the most popular website for job postings and search (Vietnamworks, 2016). The website provides job postings and company profiles both in Vietnamese and English. It allows personal users to post their resumes, cover letters and other relevant documents and institutional users to post the vacancies. It classifies vacancies by Industry categories (Building & Construction, Communications & Media, Financial Services, FMCG (fast moving consumer goods) & Retail, Hospitality & Tourism, Engineering, Manufacturing, Medical, Services and Transportation); by Function categories (Front Office, Back Office, Technology and Production) and by Job Type categories (Entry Level, Executive Management, Temporary/Contract, Overseas Jobs and Expatriate Jobs in Vietnam) (Vietnamworks, 2016). Vietnamworks company profiles include the address, contact person, company size and some other useful information to ease the applicant to decide whether to apply for the vacancy offered by this particular company or not. It appears that Vietnamworks facilitates applications from smaller cities, as it can reach a greater audience that might be a part of the potential pool of applicants compared to more traditional means of job advertisements. A less popular Vietnamese job site is Anphabe.com (Anphabe, 2016). Although it was promising in the beginning, it couldn’t survive the competition with Vietnamworks.

**ASEAN SOCIO-ECONOMIC COMMUNITY**

ASEAN Community expected to be established in 2020 is based on 3 pillars: Political and security community, economic community, and socio-cultural community (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009a, p.1; 2014, p.1). ASEAN leaders agreed on ASCC Blueprint on 2007 in Singapore and the blueprint is implemented by the new agreements (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009a, p.1). Tens of agreements have been signed for the establishment of ASCC covering various areas such as education, biodiversity, disaster management and emergency response, development fund, health, youth, elimination of violence against women, heritage, pollution, conservation of nature, environmental sustainability, science fund, ship and aircraft accidents, migrant workers, children, millennium development goals, health emergencies, SARS, infectious diseases, media etc. (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009b).
The blueprint states that

“The primary goal of the ASCC is to contribute to realising an ASEAN Community that is people-centred and socially responsible with a view to achieving enduring solidarity and unity among the nations and peoples of ASEAN by forging a common identity and building a caring and sharing society which is inclusive and harmonious where the well-being, livelihood, and welfare of the peoples are enhanced” (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009a, p.1).

ASCC intends to promote cooperation, shared responsibility, and environmental sustainability across the region, human and social development, gender equality, human rights and social justice (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009a, p.1). In particular, the blueprint lists the following:

“(a) Human Development; (b) Social Welfare and Protection; (c) Social Justice and Rights; (d) Ensuring Environmental Sustainability (e) Building the ASEAN Identity; and (f) Narrowing the Development Gap” (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009a, p.1).

Thirdly, the organization of the blueprint provides us a clear idea about the values and the foundations of ASCC:

“Human development (advancing and prioritising education, investing in human resource development, promotion of decent work, promoting information and communication technology (ICT), facilitating access to applied Science and Technology (S&T), strengthening entrepreneurship skills for women, youth, elderly and persons with disabilities, and building civil service capability); social welfare and protection (poverty alleviation, social safety net and protection from the negative impacts of integration and globalization, enhancing food security and safety, access to healthcare and promotion of healthy lifestyles, improving capability to control communicable diseases, ensuring a drug-free ASEAN, and building disaster-resilient nations and safer communities), social justice and rights (promotion and protection of the rights and welfare of women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities, protection and promotion of the rights of migrant workers, and promoting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)), ensuring environmental sustainability (addressing global environmental issues, managing and preventing transboundary environmental pollution (transboundary haze pollution and transboundary movement of hazardous wastes), promoting sustainable development through environmental education and public participation, promoting Environmentally Sound Technology (EST), promoting quality living standards in ASEAN cities/urban areas, harmonizing environmental policies and databases, promoting the sustainable use of coastal and marine environment, promoting sustainable management of natural resources and biodiversity, promoting the sustainability of freshwater resources, responding to climate change and addressing its impacts, and promoting Sustainable Forest Management (SFM)), building ASEAN identity (promotion of ASEAN awareness and a sense of community), preservation and promotion of ASEAN cultural heritage, promotion of cultural creativity and industry, and engagement with the community), and narrowing the development gap” (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009a).
As to education, ASEAN aims to achieve universal access to primary education (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009a, p.2). Other noteworthy points for education is “the teaching of common values and cultural heritage in school curricula and develop teaching materials and capability for this purpose” (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009a, p.2), offering ASEAN studies courses at all levels of education and promoting “the options of university placements in an institution of higher learning in a second ASEAN Member State through "a semester abroad" or "a year abroad" programme” (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009a, pp.2-3). ASEAN identity making through education is particularly promising. The ASEAN University Network (AUN) which currently has 30 members offering 12,000 courses was set up in 1995 while the AUN ASEAN Credit Transfer System (AUN-ACTS) that allow inter-ASEAN student exchange was established in 2011 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2014a, p.45). Let us also note that the longest coverage and discussions in the blueprint are about environmental issues.

ASSC Mid-term Review employs 5 assessment criteria (relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact) to evaluate the implementation performance (ASEAN Secretariat, 2014b, p.3). The review lists “[e]vents such as the ASEAN Festival of Arts, ASEAN Cities of Culture, Best of ASEAN Performing Arts, ASEAN Quiz, ASEAN Studies courses, ASEAN Corners or the ASEAN Day celebration” as activities that are instrumental to build a common ASEAN identity (ASEAN Secretariat, 2014b, p.7). ASEAN Games and other sport activities can be added to this list. Another tool to forge an ASEAN identity is the modification of the primary and secondary level curricula (ASEAN Secretariat, 2014b, p.7) which is aided by the publication of the ASEAN Curriculum Sourcebook (ASEAN Secretariat, 2014a, p.7). According to ASSC Mid-Term Review Report, most of the targets for human development dimension has been met, evidenced by progress in ASEAN level of education and other indicators (ASEAN Secretariat, 2014a, p.10).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR USES OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO PROMOTE ASEAN SOCIO-CULTURAL COMMUNITY IN VIETNAM

Based on the review of the uses of social media in Vietnam and the overview of ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, the following recommendations are proposed:

Recognizing the fact that Facebook is the most popular social media in Vietnam, the ASEAN SCC (ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community) promotion campaign should be implemented on Facebook. Currently, there is a Facebook page with a few likes, named 'ASEAN Vietnam’; but its focus is not ASEAN SCC. In fact, it focuses mostly on promoting Vietnam in general. The main ASEAN Facebook page has nearly 500,000 likes, but it is not specialized in promoting ASEAN SCC for Vietnamese Facebook users. Thus, a Facebook page named ASEAN SCC is recommended.

Recognizing the fact that the most active Vietnamese age group on Facebook is the 15-34 age group, it is recommended that the content should be tailored to match the interests of the youth. Given that music videos and online games are very popular among this group, ASEAN music video exchanges and online game updates would be
the most appropriate contents to promote this regional integration project. As mobile users are the primary segment to consider, the content uploaded should be adapted to mobile phone use. As seen above, 20:00-22:00 period is the most appropriate to attract likes, comments, shares and other forms of interactions in Vietnam.

As stated before, ASEAN SCC covers areas such as education, biodiversity, disaster management and emergency response, development fund, health, youth, elimination of violence against women, heritage, pollution, conservation of nature, environmental sustainability, science fund, ship and aircraft accidents, migrant workers, children, millennium development goals, health emergencies, SARS, infectious diseases, media etc. Among these, education and youth would be the most common themes to explore for the primary segment. Biodiversity, elimination of violence against women, pollution, conservation of nature and environmental sustainability themes were proven to be of interest to green NGOs operating in Vietnam. Their contributions would be valuable. Disaster management and emergency response would be a promising theme to build a common identity, as solidarity in times of difficulties stands as a powerful group cohesive. However, language barriers would be a major obstacle against forging a common identity (Gezgin, 2015). Thus, Vietnamese, English and preferably other ASEAN languages in addition to Vietnamese should be considered for the content provision. A focus on visual content rather than verbal materials would also be reasonable to overcome language barriers.

As another point to consider, Vietnamworks website could be encouraged to offer new categories of vacancies such as ASEAN jobs (jobs for Vietnamese in ASEAN countries) and Vietnam jobs for ASEAN nationals. That is also a relevant proposal for ASEAN Economic Community. As explained previously, Vietnamworks is the most popular job search website in Vietnam. That is why it may turn into an appropriate channel to promote ASEAN SCC.

To conclude, one needs to be reminded that the future is in the new mobile generation. That is why, regional integration attempts such as ASEAN SCC should focus on what is coming rather than what has already gone with a focus on themes that are easier to unite the region such as education, environment and disasters and by encouraging various popular websites to support the promotion campaigns.
REFERENCES


http://www.slideshare.net/dr_gezgin/asean-paper-ulasbasargezgin


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