Ladies Selling Breakfast

COVID-19 Disruption of Intimate Socialities among Street-Engaged Food Traders in Ho Chi Minh City

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ABSTRACT: Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam's largest city, supports a vibrant street food culture. Most of the city's street-engaged food traders are poor and unskilled women, and there is scant research about how they build social networks and social capital that sustain their micro-businesses. This article focusses on the intimate socialities that street-engaged food traders develop with customers, shop owners and sister-traders in order to stabilise their incomes while their informal street-trading activities are policed and potentially shut down. Recent COVID-19 lockdown and social-distancing measures disrupted the crucial interpersonal relations of street trading and left the traders with no income. This article explores traders' strategies for achieving economic security, and outlines transformations of intimate socialities into mediated and digital relations after the lockdown.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, informal labour, interpersonal communication, social networks, street food, street traders, Vietnam

On 10 April 2020, roughly halfway through Vietnam's lockdown, the government announced an economic recovery package of VND 62,000 billion (US\$2.7 billion) to support vulnerable groups seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including self-employed persons, migrants and women. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reports nearly 18 million Vietnamese are in informal jobs and that self-employed women are particularly vulnerable as economic instabilities compound patriarchal norms (Thu Hằng 2020). Around half (52.1 per cent) of all women workers in Vietnam are unskilled, and on average women earn 81.1 per cent of men's incomes (VND 5.22 million compared to 5.92 million/month) (Vietnam General Confederation of Labour 2020).

Vietnam's largest metropolis, the southern mega-city Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), is home to around one in ten Vietnamese (General Statistics Office 2019). As Kirsten Endres and Ann Marie Leskhowich (2018) outline, informal trade is a means for Vietnam's poor to achieve viable incomes. Nevertheless, selling food

and other services on the streets has been prohibited. While popular, street trade is framed as a social problem and policy challenge concerning food hygiene, pollution and city branding. And then came COVID-19 and social-distancing measures, which restricted economic activity and plunged Vietnam's poor into a state of uncertainty. Based on in-depth interviews with seven ladies selling breakfast on the pavement on a residential street in inner-urban Bình Thạnh District in HCMC, this article examines the vagaries of street trade. Interpreting their strategies as intimate socialities, the article examines how interpersonal social networks with customers, shop owners and sister-traders stabilise traders' incomes and how these were disrupted by the COVID-19 lockdown.

HCMC's Street-Engaged Food Traders

A mega-city like HCMC fosters a vibrant street food culture that caters to busy city folk and provides a

valuable up-to-date network of communication and connection. HCMC people typically take breakfast outside at pavement stalls near their home: they are prevalent, convenient, inexpensive and reliable. To meet the demand, a diversity of food micro-businesses have popped up in residential areas near schools or offices. The peak time for breakfast is 7:00 am to 9:00 am, and a stall typically sells 100–150 servings each morning.

The seven traders in Bình Thạnh District operate along a stretch of pavement about 300 metres long. They sell *cháo* (rice porridge), coffee, *com tấm* (broken rice), *chè* (sweet soup), newspapers and boiled eggs, *bún riêu* (crab vermicelli soup) and *súp cua* (minced crab soup) (see Figure 1).

Starting a micro-business is not easy. Regular customers are essential, as *chị Năm* discovered. Seven years ago, before she had children, *chị Năm* *bún riêu* (Sister crab vermicelli) started street trading. In those early days, *chị Năm* pushed a trolley around the streets from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm. *Chị Năm* explains:

Every day to cover the costs, I had to sell at least sixty bowls, but at any one place I only sold three bowls. As my reputation grew and I got more customers, I travelled less distance and I could sell one hundred bowls in one place.

Chị Năm built her customer base through interpersonal relations and the social capital associated with serving a tasty dish that is prepared hygienically. After three years, she set up more or less permanently on the pavement in Bình Thạnh District. Every morning, she sold *bún riêu* from 7:00 am to 9:00 am, and then looked after her two kids.

While *chị Năm* built her business, two other ladies fell into this informal trade by chance. *Chị Sáu cà phê*

(Sister coffee) was born in Bình Thạnh District. Her widowed mother's modest income was not enough to cover daily expenses. *Chị Sáu* left school after the ninth grade to sell fruit. She was married at age 21 and within two years gave birth and got divorced. With no financial support, she continued selling fruit, but did not generate enough income. One day, she shared her troubles with a neighbour who used to sell goods on the pavement in Bình Thạnh District. *Chị Sáu* explains:

My neighbour tipped me off that no one on the pavement was selling drinks and suggested I try selling coffee. So I changed from fruit to coffee and joined the other traders on the pavement. For the past 21 years, I have started every morning at 4:00 am to catch the men who deliver goods to the market and from 7:00 am sell coffees to my sister-traders' customers.

Also trading there is *chị Hai com tấm* (Sister broken rice). She also grew up in Bình Thạnh District. Her parents divorced and, because her mother remarried and moved out, she was raised by her maternal grandparents (*ông bà ngoại*). They ran a successful furniture shop, which she eventually took over. Four years later, after marrying, she started a money-lending service. But things became difficult. *Chị Hai* explains:

One of my customers could not pay back the instalment on a loan. She wasn't there but her husband asked me to wait until he could sell a street trader's trolley, which was valued at about VND 3 million (US\$130). I negotiated to take the trolley instead of the cash.

The trolley was set up for selling *bánh mì* (baguette sandwiches with pork and pickles) and *chị Hai* thought it could help her younger sister. But the sister did not want to trade. Because *chị Hai*'s own husband has a significant position, she did not want to cause trouble for him by conducting prohibited street sales by herself. But she started selling *bánh mì* (baguettes). She was surprised to find that this form of informal trade was more successful than expected. Ladies selling breakfast can earn around VND 500,000 per day (about US\$21), which adds up to around VND 15 million (US\$645) per month. This is much higher than an urban factory worker's monthly income of around VND 7 million (US\$300) and the average monthly income in HCMC in 2018 of around VND 10.3 million (US\$445) (Thu Hằng 2018).

At her trolley, *chị Hai* enjoyed talking with customers. Soon, she noticed no one on the pavement was selling broken rice, a popular breakfast typically served with grilled pork chops and fried eggs. She launched her new micro-business, although her husband was not supportive initially, because she was

Figure 1. Map of food stalls on the pavement in Bình Thạnh District. Prepared by Ngoc-Bich Pham.

fed up with staying home while he worked outside. Trading not only provided a reliable income, but also improved her social life and integration into the neighbourhood.

Intimate Socialities of Street-Based Trade

While the ladies selling breakfast have different life circumstances, street-based trade offered them a way to overcome economic hardship through a socially vibrant and family-friendly activity. Yet none of the ladies wanted to expand her business. Rather, they built a sustainable flexible micro-business that enabled them to juggle the demands of paid and unpaid work and build friendships.

Making friends highlights the reciprocal social bonds that develop between (mostly) women of different ages who share varying but entangled economic and social investments centred on producing and consuming everyday meals. We refer to these bonds as 'intimate socialities'. They reflect 'newer discourses of intimacy' that are non-sexual (Attwood et al. 2017), and that describe mediated 'personal connections' (Baym 2015). While intimate socialities involve face-to-face and online interactions, they are unlike the personal relationships described by Deborah Chambers (2013) that develop online. Rather, intimate socialities in Vietnam develop in public/private urban spaces that Lisa Drummond (2000) describes as 'inside out' and 'outside in'. Between non-kin, social relationships are expressed using kinship terms. Family vocabulary illustrates connectedness and camaraderie across and within generational lines (Chew 2011). On this public/private pavement, intimate labour of meal preparation and feeding occurs, but contrasts with caring, sex work and manicuring in other analyses of intimate labour (e.g. Boris and Parrenas 2010). Ladies selling breakfast try to build multiple intimate socialities in order to consolidate social relations and build loyalty and trust.

Customer Intimacies

To build intimate social relations with customers, the ladies selling breakfast made every effort to show that their food is hygienic and safely sourced. This mitigated a bias that street food is unclean and fostered trust with customers, which encouraged them to return. Next, the ladies sought to learn customers' tastes and adjusted their dishes to gain customers' sentiments and ongoing support. Last, they saw to it that their prices were low enough to ensure that people would continue the traditional practice of eating out regu-

larly. Each of the ladies had a network of 25 to 35 regular customers. These regulars sometimes ordered directly by phone and had the food delivered by *xe ôm* (a traditional neighbourhood motorbike taxi service).

Once street-engaged traders have established a viable customer base, they deploy strategies to maintain social relationships. Talking with customers is one way in which the ladies gradually became friends with their regulars, who would come not only to eat but also to share personal problems and ask for advice. Customers would also bring different kinds of food for the ladies, or a small gift from a holiday or trip. The ladies said that without their work and their customers they would feel very lonely.

Shop Owner Intimacies

Besides making friends with regular customers, street-engaged traders also need to negotiate their place in someone's doorway. Building social connections with the shop or home-owners behind the pavement is important for business. Some owners are not supportive of traders parking their trolleys out front, and they call the ward police. But, on the pavement in Bình Thạnh District, most owners express their sympathies to the ladies selling breakfast and in return the ladies express their gratitude by keeping the place clean, not making excessive noise, and providing assistance whenever they can. Additionally, at Vietnamese Lunar New Year (*Tết Nguyên Đán*), the ladies give small gifts or lucky money (*lì xì*) to the owners. On the other side, owners may give traders clean water or repair the pavement. In general, relations between the ladies and the owners are good.

Sister-Trader Intimacies

During the morning trade, the ladies also help one another by lending a knife or a plastic bag for take-away. If one of the ladies is overwhelmed with customers, another may help serve. After the breakfast service, they usually take a break together to chat and share *nước ép trái cây* (freshly squeezed juice). The ladies have developed very close and harmonious relationships with each other and, typically of a Vietnamese workplace, they treat each other as though they are relatives using kinship pronouns such as *chị-em* (older-younger sister). However they started their business, they consolidated by drawing on interpersonal networks to foster crucial intimate socialities. The ladies' intimacies cut across conventional constraints of gendered and socially hierarchical interpersonal relations and, like the *hẻm* (laneway) where the trade takes place, the intimate socialities they foster are open-ended.

Intimate Socialities in the Battle with Policing

Despite meeting with economic and social success, each lady selling breakfast has faced challenges. Indeed street trading was prohibited in 1995 by Vietnamese Government Decree 36 and in 2008 by HCMC Government Decision 74/2008/QĐ-UBND. These laws exacerbated matters for the ladies, who had already lacked sufficient financial capital to rent fixed shops or to formally register their businesses. Even though they know that their current activities violate these laws, they continue trading. As one lady who sells *chè* (sweet soup) on the pavement in the afternoons explains the situation:

We were always worried that our businesses would not succeed, because when the *tụi phường* [the local team] come we run, when they go we sell. It was a very hard time, but if we didn't work, we would go hungry.

As a result of these laws, street-engaged traders have battled for their livelihoods with the local Management of Urban Order Team (MUOT) (*Đội Quản lý trật tự đô thị*). Since 1995, at the district level, the MUOT has been responsible for keeping order on the streets. If the ladies were not quick enough in stowing their trolleys and running away, they would be fined anywhere from VND 150,000 to VND 3,000,000 (US\$6.50 – US\$130) and have their trolleys confiscated. The ladies did not establish social relations with the MUOT. Instead, they built connections with locals, who could tip them off to the presence of an MUOT officer.

Their battles with the MUOT did not end until 2019, when HCMC's districts finally relented and recognised in policy that (a) if someone has been selling on the pavement for a long time; (b) if they are registered permanent residents of that district; and (c) if they have no stable formal job, then they are allowed to continue selling as long as the pavement is more than three metres wide and they trade within white lines drawn by authorities to mark out a pedestrian zone (Hoàng Đạt, et al. 2018).

Impact of COVID-19 Social Distancing on Street-Engaged Traders

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnam went into a national lockdown from 1 to 23 April 2020. Strict social-distancing measures compelled all street-engaged traders to suspend their activities. During lockdown, the ladies tried to continue selling.

But sales dropped about 50 per cent because people could not sit down together to eat. Instead, customers chose takeaway or delivery, often using platform apps such as GrabFood. Consequently, the ladies lost their incomes and they struggled to cover their daily expenses. Across HCMC, local authorities began providing daily supplies through food bank initiatives such as a rice ATM and a zero VND market (Pham 2020). Instead, the ladies relied on non-street intimacies with their relatives, especially their siblings (*anh chị em*) who managed to retain an income and could therefore supply cash for food and other essentials.

After lockdown, street-engaged traders across HCMC recommenced their normal work, but business declined dramatically (Mai Ka 2020). Only about 70 per cent of the ladies' customers returned. Vietnamese eating behaviours have changed. People now avoid contact with others and do not eat out as usual. These days, they prefer to order from the ladies online. Having established interpersonal networks in the neighbourhood enables the ladies to foster trust and support as well as mitigate risk. COVID-19 has disrupted intimate socialities and transformed them into a mediated form that involves digital skills, unfamiliar apps and a new form of social distancing that potentially leaves the ladies selling breakfast on the pavement doing so all alone.

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