

**THE REPRESENTATIONS OF TRANSGENDER PERSONS IN
VIETNAMESE ONLINE MEDIA**

by

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DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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ABSTRACT

The visibility of transgender persons in the Vietnamese media has been increasing recently, especially after the advocacy campaign for the rights of Vietnamese transgender persons which culminated in the amendment of the Civil Code in 2015. Nevertheless, there remains a scarcity of research on transgender persons. Notably, there has been no research focusing on images of transgender individuals in Vietnamese media. Transgender persons belong to the most vulnerable group of minorities and experience deep-rooted discrimination. How their non-conforming gender expression is represented will contribute to the broad social understanding of transgender persons. This thesis is interested in how transgender people are portrayed in Vietnamese online media. The thesis reviews images of transgender persons on five online e-news channels, including both state-controlled and private sites. By examining all coverage on two major themes, transgender celebrities and the transgender representation through the law reform for the Civil Code Amendment 2015, this thesis argues that, to some extent, although the transgender representations in Vietnamese social media seem to be progressive, their portrayals still bear subtle transphobia and reinforce gender binaries.

INTRODUCTION

For a decade, the LGBT movement in Vietnam has made noticeable achievements. Although LGBT people in Vietnam do not suffer as harshly as they do in many other countries, these minority groups are still facing discrimination and stigma. Particularly, they suffer legal discrimination (Oosterhoff & Hoang, 2014). Same-sex couples are not entitled to get married as heterosexual couples. Transgender persons are not legally recognized. Similar to many societies, non-heterosexual and gender non-conforming persons in Vietnam are believed to be “abnormal”. Rarely have facts about these minority groups been reported in the media and when the LGBT community is covered in the media, their representations are often distorted. Mueller (2011, p.24) wrote:

Twelve years ago, in Vietnam homosexuality was an ambiguous concept to most people. The terms gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) were not taught in schools and when it was rarely portrayed in the media, it was always with a negative bias, making any non-heterosexual thoughts taboo in Vietnam. In 2002 homosexuality was declared a ‘social evil’ by the local media.

In recent years, transgender persons in Vietnam have become more visible. Since its birth in 2007, the Institute for Studies of Society, Economics and Environment (iSEE), a local non-governmental organization (NGO) which is dedicated to working for the rights of minority groups, especially LGBT people, has made efforts to bring LGBT issues onto the political agenda. In 2008, iSEE conducted the first LGBT project in Vietnam *For a Positive Image of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people in Vietnam* funded by the Ford Foundation (Horton et al., 2015, p.1066). At the end of this year, iSEE founded a community-based group called *Information Connecting and Sharing (ICS)* which was the predecessor of a community-based organization aiming to share official and

positive information about LGBT issues with the media (Pham, 2009). This was a milestone because there was an alliance between lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities in Vietnam working together to create positive images of sexual minorities in the media (Pham, 2009). The visibility of LGBT people in Vietnam increased after the first VietPride in 2012, an initiative of a Vietnamese activist and the Center for Studies and Applied Science in Gender, Family, Women and Adolescents (CSAGA), a local NGO working for women's rights. The first VietPride was held on three days of the weekend, opening with a Pride Night of ceremony, followed by a Pride Day with workshops, sharing, and film screenings, and ending with a bike rally of 150 participants cycling and driving along the streets of Hanoi (Oosterhoff et al., 2014, p. 23). After this historical event, a series of activities related to LGBT was organised in which the "I am transgender" was a coming-out campaign to advocate for the rights of transgender people in the media in 2015 (see Hulk, 2015). Following this campaign, the amendment of the Civil Code was passed on 24 December 2015 allowing a person to undergo sex-reassignment surgery. Compared to the former Civil Code 2005 which has article 36 allowing people who has atypical congenital sex anatomy to re-determine their sexes, the amendment has new article 37 allowing people who wish to change their sexes to undergo sex-reassignment surgery. Thus, the new bill expands its objects, including transgender persons. This is considered a progress in the new law. Until 2012, when VietPride and LGBT issues began to draw much attention from the media and support from the public and the government (UNDP, 2014, p.6), many Vietnamese people were not familiar with the term "transgender". Alongside the first Pride, some Vietnamese transgender celebrities appeared in the media and on television, such as singers Thai Tai and Lam Chi Khanh (Bengtsson et al., 2013, p.2). Thus, transgender visibility in Vietnam is emerged and growing.

Clearly, the LGBT movement has made significant progress. While formerly the media have been regarded as the number one enemy of LGBT people in Vietnam (Blanc, 2005) now, one may argue that the media has contributed considerably to this progress. However, while the visibility of LGBT people in the media has grown there are few studies on the representations of LGBT people in the media and there is no study at all on the representations of transgender persons. Among these minority groups, transgender persons are the most vulnerable and paid least attention by scholars. In Vietnam, transgender persons are sometimes included and misperceived as homosexual persons; transgenderism is viewed as an extreme and visible form of homosexuality (UNDP, 2014, p.12). Therefore, to contribute to understanding transgender persons in Vietnam this thesis aims to examine the representation in Vietnamese media. It focuses on this representation in online media in particular.

The thesis seeks to answer the question: “How are transgender persons represented in online media in Vietnam?”. This question is motivated firstly by a desire to broaden my understanding of the diversity of gender identities in Vietnam; secondly, to be a basis for recommendations on how to communicate information and ideas about transgender persons; and thirdly, to be a foundation for activists to advocate for law and policies on transgender persons in the next stage of drafting the Law of Sex-reassignment. Finally, it will be an important contribution to inform further research in this area in the future.

Terminology is a key area of struggle for LGBT people. In this thesis, I use these following terms to refer to persons who are gender non-conforming: transgender persons, transgender man/female-to-male (FTM), transgender woman/male-to-female (MTF). I use these terms because they are used by firstly by transgender persons themselves, and they are used by Vietnamese scholars and the media too. Some other terms such as transsexualism and transvestism are sometimes used

but they are not popular. More importantly, transsexualism sometimes is misunderstood as referring to the condition of someone who wants to undergo sex-reassignment surgery to fix their wrong body. Thus, these terms may limit the concept of transgender persons and excludes many people. Besides, I also mention the term “intersex”, referring to people who has congenital sex anatomy that are considered atypical for females or males (Dreger & Herndon, 2009), because the Civil Code 2015 amendment discussed in the thesis partly applies to this group.

My thesis draws on Judith Butler’s argument on the metaphysics of gender identity to establish a framework for investigating the way that media represent transgender persons. Butler (1990) opposed the traditional way of understanding gender identity which requires that a man necessarily has a male sexed body and a woman necessarily has a female sexed body and gender is perceived to be expression of these sexed bodies. In her work *Gender Trouble*, Butler is a key author who offers a rejection of the conventional notion of physical sexed body by arguing that “there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender” (Butler, 1990, p. 25). Butler claims that gender identity does not have a subject pre-existing gender expression. Thus, Butler rejects a “realness” of gender, contending gender is a product of social constructions.

After this introduction, the first chapter of the thesis will review the literature about transgender persons in Vietnam and the global literature on the representation of transgender persons in the media. In the second chapter, I present the methodology of the thesis. Chapter three is the first of two chapters that present the original findings of my research. It investigates the representation of transgender celebrities. Chapter four examines the representations of transgender persons through the media reporting of the law reform process in

2015. The last chapter is the conclusion and includes recommendations for better representation of transgender persons in online media.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

This first chapter is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the literature about transgender persons in Vietnam. The second part reviews the global literature on the representations of transgender persons in the media.

Part 1: Transgender Persons in Vietnam

This first section reviews all the literature about transgender persons in Vietnam. Although literature in Vietnam mentions people who do not conform to the prevailing sex/gender binary quite early, in a psychoanalytic article written 40 years ago, the term “transgender” has only appeared recently. Before 2012, it was rare to find studies focused on transgender/transsexualism. While these studies have contributed to the academic field, their contribution to the common knowledge on transgender issues has not been remarkable. Additionally, the literature on Vietnamese transgender persons has given priority to the HIV/AIDS issue, and other significant issues of transgender persons have not been addressed. Since the first Viet Pride in 2012, some local non-governmental organizations which pay attention to transgender persons and their issues have emerged. However, there is no research on representations of transgender persons in Vietnamese media.

Vietnam’s first literature on ‘transsexualism’ appeared in 1975. Psychoanalysts, Heiman & Le (1975), analysed ‘transsexual’ behaviour through observing and testing one male client who had male sexual organs, but thought of himself and performed gender as a woman. They argued that forms of transsexual behaviour and the ways that Vietnamese people responded to transsexualism occurred across a continuum. At one end of the continuum transsexualism is institutionalized and performed following a prescribed cultural pattern. For

instance, the “hermaphroditic witches” who are trained to be healers since being a child believe that they are inhabited by female spirits. In the middle of the continuum, the idiosyncratic transsexual is provided an acceptable cultural role. This occurs when unhealthy children were cross-dressed to disguise them from evil spirits. The last point of the continuum is where transsexual behaviour is not seen clearly or is only accidentally known (Heiman & Le, 1975, p.89). After this first study of transsexualism, there were no others focusing on transsexual or transgender persons until 2012. Nguyen the historical and linguistic literature shows that the “transgender phenomenon” had been apparent in Vietnam for a long time. The research shows that *Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu*¹, a Vietnamese history record, reported the case of “the Nge An² girl turns into a boy” in 1351; and the oldest son of King Le Hien Tong, An Vuong Tuan, was recorded after that as “being a smart, knowledgeable, outstanding, but stubborn person who *enjoyed dressing as a woman*” (as cited in Pham et al., 2012). Nguyen also studies some terms to refer to transgender persons in the first Vietnamese dictionary³ in 1986 and the Chinese -Vietnamese dictionary⁴ in 1931 (as cited in Pham et al., 2012, p. 101). The term “dong” entered in the two dictionaries has the same pronunciation but different meanings. The popular meanings of the terms “dong” and/or “bong” refer to individuals or men who look effeminate and cross-dress, while the other meaning of the word “dong” in the Chinese loanword dictionary refers to homosexual orientation in which the subject is attracted by people of the same sex. This homophone has caused misunderstanding among Vietnamese people. Because of this misunderstanding about sexuality and gender identity, transgender persons were categorised as homosexual people, thus, reinforcing discrimination against transgender persons (Pham et al., 2012, p. 101).

¹ *Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu*: The Vietnamese Chronicle

² Nghe An is a province of Vietnam.

³ The first Vietnamese dictionary is *Dai Nam Quoc Am Tu Vi*

⁴ The Chinese -Vietnamese dictionary is *Tu dien Han Viet –Dao Duy Anh*

In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the Vietnamese government believed that the Doi moi (Renovation) policy had risks that negatively influenced Vietnam society. It is said that “social evils” and foreign “poisonous cultures” penetrated into Vietnam. With the first case of HIV in 1990, Vietnam rushed to design programs and mobilized funding to deal with HIV. HIV attracted the attention of various agencies, both national departments and ministries, and non-governmental organizations. In this context, the term “Men who have sex with men” (MSM) became well known in Vietnam. In many studies, transgender persons were treated as a subgroup of MSM and were regarded as a group with high-risk of transmission of HIV (Horton et al., 2015, p. 1062). Such views of MSM contributed to the stigmatization towards them. Additionally, some organizations secured their financial sources by chasing HIV/AIDS funding regardless of their capacity or real purpose (Horton et al., 2015, p. 1064). According to one review, there were 16 studies on MSM in Vietnam from 2000 to 2012, in which scholars adopted a health-based approach and treated their research population as a high-risk group for HIV transmission (Le et al., 2012). Le et al. (2012) argue that the existing literature on MSM just focuses on HIV knowledge, and fails to consider other factors, such as high rates of mental health distress and anxiety, and stigma (see Bao et al., 2016, p. 376; Colby et al., 2016; Oldenburg et al., 2016). The dominance of HIV literature and negative findings about MSM contribute to misperceptions of transgender persons (Horton et al., 2015). These studies were conducted by both Vietnamese researchers and foreign researchers, from national agencies (the National Institute on Drug Abuse, and the National Institute of Mental Health) and international donors (CARE, Ford Foundation, SIDA, amfAR; University of Pittsburgh, Alere Inc). While there has been enormous funding for HIV/AIDS research many other issues are neglected.

Since 2007, some local NGOs working on human rights, especially LGBT rights have emerged. iSEE is one of them and has produced publications about LGBT

communities in Vietnam. In 2008, the project for the rights of LGBT people in Vietnam was funded by the American Ford Foundation, which created a big change because it was the first time that LGBT issues were dealt with through a rights-based approach rather than a health-based approach (Horton, 2015, p. 1066). Vietnamese society did not know much about transgender issues until 2012 when iSEE conducted the first intensive research on transgender persons in Vietnam. The study *Aspiration to be myself: Transgender people in Vietnam: realities and legal aspects* (Pham et al., 2012) provides concerning information on Vietnamese transgender persons, in a context where their public profile has been vague. The research group reviewed literature about transgender persons, implemented in-depth interviews with 34 people in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city and analysed websites of LGBT communities, including LesKing, Thegioithu3, and G3VN, to identify transgender persons' issues, their activities, and their ways they identify themselves. The findings show that Vietnamese transgender persons experienced discrimination in various settings, including school, university, family, at work, and even in the LGBT community. The report also noted that the internet has become a home and a playground where young transgender persons who experience severe discrimination find their peers and exchange information and knowledge about LGBT issues. While Vietnamese transgender persons had been suffering violence and discrimination because of their non-conforming behaviour, there has been no specific law to protect them. Thus, security bodies made no effort to support Vietnamese transgender persons; moreover, they were at risk of being refused by employers because their gender appearance opposed the sex identified in their birth certificates or other personal identity documents (Pham et al., 2012, pp. 81-86). In another study conducted in 2013, iSEE focused on transgender persons and their livelihoods. The study applied in-depth interviews and an online survey to find out the barriers that Vietnamese transgender persons experienced in searching for their jobs. The findings show that transgender women face more difficulties in seeking a job than transgender

men because of various barriers, including education, health, their own perception, especially social stigma from family, school, office and colleagues. Such barriers push transgender women to choose “last resort” jobs such as sex work or singing at funerals (Pham, 2016, p.90).

The issue of transgender persons’ livelihood was also considered by another organization, the Center of Creative Initiatives in Health and Population (CCIHP), a local NGO working in the field of health management, primary health care, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender-based violence prevention. The CCIHP’s research sought to find out the different employment options and preferences for Vietnamese transmen and transwomen and the links between stigma, education and employment (Hoang & Oosterhoff 2016, p. 5). The authors used a combination of methods, including reviewing related literature, online survey, and qualitative interviews. The findings show that Vietnamese transgender persons have limited chances to be employed but the internet has become a useful tool for generating economic opportunities (Hoang & Oosterhoff 2016, p. 23). Vietnamese transgender persons still face transphobia and homophobia at schools, universities and workplace. Livelihood opportunities are impeded by lack of education, start-up capital and weak social networks. The research points out factors that limit opportunities for transgender people, self-discrimination is a significant one. According to the report, transgender respondents restrict themselves by forcing themselves to conform Vietnamese gender norms, accordingly, they hold the concept of traditional roles that what transmen or transwomen can or cannot do (Hoang & Oosterhoff 2016, p. 23).

In her article, Nguyen (2014) considered transgender persons the most vulnerable group among the LGBT communities. Her work focuses on identified risks and challenges to transgender persons in Vietnam to suggest social work supportive measures for this group. In general, transgender issues identified in this thesis are

similar to what has been reported in the previous research of iSEE (2012). Nguyen (2014) also highlights the conditions faced by transgender persons such as being described in a discriminatory manner; difficulties in employment; risks involved with health; and legal issues. Based on these issues, Nguyen (2014) recommends social work intervention and supportive measure and emphasizes the role of education such as including LGBT issues in the curriculum of universities, providing counselling training course for social work students (Nguyen, 2014).

Autobiographies of transgender persons also contribute to bringing images of transgender persons to the public. Two are worth comment, *Chuyen Gioi* (Transgender) by Nguyen Ngoc Thach (2013) and *Toi ve chan dung toi* (I draw the portrayal of myself) by Huong Giang Idol (2014) (Idol is attached to her name as a brand after Huong Giang participated the TV show *Vietnam Idol 2012*). In *Chuyen gioi*, the main character is Jerry Minh Ngoc, a transgender woman who has witnessed one of her friend's transition. She writes about persons who dress-cross like her. Through this autobiography, Jerry Minh Ngoc shares her knowledge of transgender issues with readers, enabling them to understand that transgender persons do not necessarily need to undergo sex-reassignment (Lengkeng, 2013). Huong Giang Idol, a Vietnamese transgender celebrity who has become well-known after her participation in the TV show *Vietnam Idol 2012*, tells her own story in *Toi ve chan dung toi*. Huong Giang narrates her journey of finding her gender identity. She tells of her peaceful childhood with love from family. She realised herself quite early, especially during puberty. She liked to wear women's dresses, making up herself as a beautiful girl. When telling her love story, Huong Giang tells of her satisfaction in winning the love of a cisgender man. This made Huong Giang think that she did not need to undergo sex-reassignment surgery. But when she failed in the Vietnam Idol competition, Huong Giang changed her mind. In the last part of the autobiography Huong

Giang tells of her experience of being lonely and suffering physical pain after undergoing sex-reassignment. Transgender autobiographies like *Chuyen gioi* and *Toi ve chan dung toi* partly bring transgender issues to the readers.

In sum, although Vietnamese transgender persons appeared a long time ago in the academic literature in 1975, and even earlier in the *Vietnamese Chronicle*, their visibility has been improved recently thanks to the first VietPride, and the increasing studies conducted by local NGOs, and autobiographies of transgender persons. However, while there are only four studies that treat transgender persons as their key group and exclusively focus on them, there are a lot of studies conflating transgender persons with other groups such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, especially MSM with HIV/AIDS issue. This demonstrates the funding for transgender issues was not allocated equally. Among the four studies mentioned above, only two concern the internet and media issues, which is the subject of my thesis. The study by Hoang & Oosterhoff (2016) shows that Vietnamese transgender persons make use of the internet to self-create livelihood opportunities. This means the interaction between transgender persons and the internet is active and the internet plays a crucial role in their lives. Therefore, perception of transgender persons on the internet will have significant influence. The study by iSEE (2012) analysed the role of the internet, showing that it is a site where for transgender persons connect to their peers and seek knowledge. Thus, the images on the internet may break the mould or reinforce the prescribed social norms in relation to gender and transgender people. These aspects show the necessity of examination of transgender persons in online media. Although both of the studies help readers to understand the role of the internet, they did not focus on the online aspect. Although autobiographies of transgender people have won a significant readership, they are not representative of all Vietnamese transgender persons who are not celebrities and face more ordinary obstacles and experiences. Hence, this thesis aims to fill this gap in existing knowledge by

examining the representation of transgender persons in online media. The result of this thesis will be a good source for activists to advocate and introduce some good recommendations.

Part 2: Literature on transgender representation and the media in the world

Whilst it is hard to find literature on the representation of transgender persons in Vietnamese media in which transgender persons are the key focus of the study, it is easy to find international studies that focus on this gender minority group as the key population.

Negative portrayals of transgender persons are said to have been in the media for a long time ago. Studying the male transvestite, Sullivan (2000) writes:

[M]edia images of male transvestites often fall into one of two categories. First, largely heterosexual male characters in film cross-dress as a means to gain access to privileges, material goods or relationships that they otherwise lack... The second version of transvestism in contemporary media also involves discovery about the "truth" of a character's body. Such revelation, however, is not comic but horrific. Here the guise of femininity does not hide or empower a clever heterosexual man but reveals a monstrous gender- and sexual-deviant: a man in "gender distress." If a character has a transgender body, this detail usually is tied to some dark and horrible secret in the narrative, and the revelation about the "truth" of the body" — that a woman has a penis, or a man is a transvestite/transsexual — typically is revealed simultaneously with the revelation of another "secret" — that the person is a killer. Indeed, monstrosity or deviance almost exclusively marks images of transgender individuals, allowing for little if any sympathy from spectators. (Sullivan, 2000, p.38).

More recently, Skidmore's (2011) work on the representation of Christine Jorgensen⁵ in the mid-twentieth century press shows how the media became a means to support Jorgensen, building her power as a white woman and marginalizing others. The representation of Jorgensen adhered to the norms of white women and sexuality and created "the boundaries of "transsexual" identity" (Skidmore, 2011, p.271). Thus, the media constructed a "good transsexual" who is white and has a heterosexual orientation. Although Jorgensen was accepted by the media and the public, her representation was an embodiment of heteronormativity, class and racism.

These above transgender representations discussed in Sullivan's and Skidmore's works cover representations in the media in the past. In this section, I focus on literature that is looking at more recent media coverage. In comparison with Sullivan's findings, some scholars claim that recent representations of transgender people have made progressive steps (see Riggs, 2016; Barker Plummer, 2013) but they also identify some emergent problems in transgender representations that restrict transgender identities or affect transgender people's lives. Notwithstanding this qualified progress, scholars agree that in mainstream media, the representations of transgender persons are to serve assumed cisgender readers/audience. Lovelock (2017) argues that:

mainstream media texts speak by default to a consumer who is coded as cisgender. Indeed, in media, the hierarchical, majority/minority cis/trans binary has traditionally been reproduced by representations that construct transgender identity as pathological, deceptive and/or ridiculous (Marjorie Garber 1992; Serano 2007). In many of these representations, the transgender person's self-identity gender was positioned as fake or

⁵ Christine Jorgensen was the first, and famous, public 'transsexual' person in the US in 1952.

artificial, grounding their “real” identity in their birth-assigned sex (Serano 2007) (p. 740).

To date, most of the studies have examined the media in the US (Sender & Shaw, 2016). There are some works dealing with other Western societies such as the UK, France and Australia (see Siebler, 2012; Siebler, 2016; Vivien, 2011; Vivien & Burgess, 2013; Espineira, 2016; Jobes, 2013; Riggs et al., 2016; Humphries, 2016; Eli Dunn, 2016; Trans Media Watch, 2010; Vaughn, 2016; Pullen, 2014; Glover, 2016). Studies on the representations of transgender persons reveal how “mundane transphobia” (Riggs 2014; 2016) exists in some TV shows in the UK and the USA. “Transnormativity” in the media is the term discussed in the works of some scholars such as Riggs (2014; 2016); Barker-Plummer (2013); and Johnson (2016). The “wrong body” discourse is explored in some studies including Barker-Plummer (2013) and (Lovelock, 2016; 2017). This issue is sometimes found in studies on the representation of transgender celebrities. Vivien (2011) is interested in trans self-representation through digital storytelling. Zang’s work (2013) is the only research found that focuses on transgender representation from Asia.

Transphobia in the media – mundane transphobia

Riggs (2014) introduces the term “mundane transphobia” based on Peel’s (2001) development of the term “mundane heterosexism” (p.3). Accordingly, Riggs refers to “mundane transphobia” as “the everyday ways in which non-trans people enact marginalisation towards transgender people despite claims to inclusivity” (Riggs, 2016; p.1). Riggs et al. employ the term to examine the representations of transgender persons in the mainstream media and argue that

however, despite the fact that contemporary media representations of trans people are arguably more positive than those that have appeared

previously, there is a degree to which they continue to be both normative (i.e., they ignore the diversity of trans people's lives) and marginalising. (Riggs et al., 2016, p.1)

They argue that previous examinations of representations of transgender persons in the media has lacked a close focus on transphobia occurring through the conversation between trans and cisgender persons. Riggs contributes to the understanding of how trans persons face mundane transphobia in the mainstream media by examining an interview by Oprah Winfrey with Thomas Beatie (Riggs, 2014) and the reality television show *Celebrity Big Brother UK* (seasons 2013 and 2014) (Riggs et al., 2016). In his analysis of the interview by Oprah Winfrey with Thomas Beatie, a trans man, Riggs critiques Winfrey's statements to show transphobia towards Beatie. Whether she intended this or not her statements reveal an acceptance of the 'normal form' of an embodiment where sex organs align with gender identities. By doing so, Winfrey indirectly rejects Beatie's identity as a man (Riggs, 2014, p.7). Riggs and colleagues examine interactions among contestants of the reality television show *Celebrity Big Brother UK* season 2013, focusing on interactions between Lauren Harries, who identifies as transsexual, and three cisgender housemates. They categorise mundane transphobia into four types: 1) jocular mockery, 2) discounting discrimination, 3) focusing on anatomy, and 4) liberal inclusivity. The writers also pointed out in their analysis of the 2014 season, in which a cisgender contestant was accused of transphobia, that in the 2013 season mundane transphobia occurred without any recognition. Hence, the problem was not voiced, even though it was as problematic as the statement about feeling "uncomfortable", as spoken by the accused cisgender contestant in the 2014 season. Therefore, Riggs and colleagues emphasize the importance of more detailed and nuanced understandings of the ways that media regulatory bodies monitor representations of trans people,

particularly the mundane ways in which subtle discrimination can occur (Riggs, 2016, p.11).

Wrong Body Discourse

Barker-Plummer (2013) traces the news coverage from 2002 to 2006 in the case of murdered transgender teen in California, Gwen Araujo. The writer argues that ways in which the media narrated the case were congruent with the broader cultural context and media representations of transgender persons. The writer found that the discourse focuses on “fixing a wrong body”. Barker-Plummer defines “wrong body discourse” as

an account of gender nonconformity that sees it as the (accidental, biological) result of an individual’s brain or psyche being misaligned with their anatomy, so that an individual may identify as being one gender while living in the body of the “other,” thus being in the “wrong body” (Barker-Plummer, 2013, p.711).

The discourse has become the main explanation for transgender persons to self-articulate (see Prosser, 1998) as well as for journalists to report on transgender persons in recent years. Even though the author acknowledges that “wrong body discourse” may be a progressive step forward in the representations of transgender persons because at least it does not treat transgender persons as pathological persons or deceivers, this prominent discourse remains problematic as it reinforces the gender binary and constrains gender identity. Barker-Plummer argues that when journalists use the “wrong body discourse” to explain the Araujo case, they marginalize Araujo’s gender fluidity. This includes referring to Araujo as a boy and using the “he” pronoun and using Araujo’s birth name, Edward, rather than the name that Araujo actually chose and used for herself. Additionally, the first wave of news reports portrayed Araujo as a trickster and “A Man Who Dressed Like a Woman” (Barker-Plummer, 2013, p. 215). By examining coverage of this case, the author also concludes that transphobia is a clear thread in the early news coverage of the case (Barker-Plummer, 2013). Beside Barker-

Plummer's work, the "wrong body" discourse in the narratives of transgender persons is identified in other studies on transgender representations in the media, particularly in some representations of trans celebrities which are now discussed.

The representation of celebrity, reality TV shows and documentaries

McIntyre (2011) has discussed transgender celebrities in mainstream media. Carlotta is an Australian cabaret and television star who started her career in the 1960s. Carlotta was known as the first transsexual woman who drew attention from the public, thanks to her celebrity status. McIntyre scrutinizes the representation of Carlotta on the Australian screen for half a century as the treatment of a celebrity whose embodiment was often marginalised. She scrutinizes the ways that Carlotta can be understood as challenging the solid system of sex-gender. Like Lovelock (2017), McIntyre shows the power of celebrity and celebrity culture in which the private lives of stars behind the scenes is interesting to the public while also examining the nature of celebrity, which belongs to the general public rather than any one specific person, having been born out of and nurtured through the representation of that person in the public media. The author analyses four screen representations of Carlotta over time, concluding that Carlotta is an illustration of various progressive possibilities of transsexualism defined by different transgender theorists including Stone (2006), Bornstein (1992), and Wilchins (1997). For McIntyre in *The Naked Bunyip*, a documentary film in 1970 by Murray (2005), the representation of Carlotta's attire, her behaviour and her body illustrated that transsexualism does not necessary require clear transition from one side of the gender binary to the other. In this documentary Carlotta shared that

she was 'born a woman in the shell of a man', a statement that might be misunderstood in some contexts to support a gender binary. Nevertheless, any such reading is dispelled as she also describes ambiguities of her gendering, observing that in everyday life when dressed as a man,

onlookers were perplexed about which sex/gender she ‘belonged’ to, and that she actually disrupted gender expectations less while dressed and passing for a woman (McIntyre, 2011, p. 25).

This ambiguity of Carlotta’s identity proves Bornstein’s theory that “transsexualism refuses a binary gender framework and is instead a form of gendering that is a process of transformation” (Bornstein 1992, pp. 51-52). Examining Carlotta’s representation in the TV show *Number 96 (1972-1977)*, McIntyre states that her role as a transgender person was portrayed positively because the character is represented as an attractive woman who has a romantic relationship with a man. However, Robyn, the character played by Carlotta, is exposed as a transgender woman and the relationship ends. The character then disappears after this shocking revelation. The author notes that this trajectory reduced the positive aspect of the representation that the TV series created. In particular, McIntyre critiques the way the film producer tried to keep Carlotta’s identity secret to ensure the drama of the revelation would be more interesting to audiences. In 1996, in the TV current affairs program *60 Minutes*, Carlotta was interviewed by a reporter and her past identity as a male was recalled. At the same time Carlotta shared her feelings of freedom after having her penis removed. The last show that McIntyre considers praises Carlotta’s representation in the television panel show *Beauty and The Beast, from 1997 to 2000*, where she was respected and could openly discuss her transsexualism, as she described it. McIntyre concludes that Carlotta’s screen representations reflect the broader Australian culture in relation to transgender celebrity, attitudes towards transsexualism and discrimination against transsexual people. Further the process of Carlotta’s gender shaping follows the Stone’s (2006) intertextual transsexualism theory. However, McIntyre also acknowledges that Carlotta’s representation on TV screens offered the audience the chance to perceive a real transgender individual’s actual experiences and views on transsexualism, which

created a positive impact for transgender lives (McIntyre, 2011). McIntyre also has other articles on the representations of transgender celebrities in mainstream Australian television and films (see McIntyre, 2015; McIntyre, 2017). In these works, McIntyre argues that the representations of transgender celebrities and transgender contestants in reality TV show contribute to the increasing of transgender visibility. However, their representations are constructed within a framework that allows them to be acceptable (McIntyre, 2015). Accordingly, transgender identities are tolerated if they are celebrities, perform on the stage as a white showgirl drag queen, and adhere to the Western beauty standard (McIntyre, 2015).

Sender (2013) analyses the way that Chaz Bono, a female-to-male transgender celebrity, narrated himself in his documentaries *Become Chaz* and *Being Chaz*, his memoir *Transition* (2011), and through the six episodes of the show *Dancing with the Stars (DWTS)* as well as the circulation of his representation among other media outlets. To consider whether the representation of Bono serves progressive transgender politics, Sender draws on Halberstam's model which proposes that "at their best, transgender politics are part of a larger form of queer critique that destabilizes the foundations of heteronormativity and questions the relays of stability between gender, family and nation" (as cited in Sender, 2013, p. 303). According to Sender's analysis, Bono's representations in the documentaries and in *DWTS* are not the same. In both documentaries and the show, Bono expresses himself as a man 'trapped in the wrong body', aligning with Prosser's argument that this is the feeling of many transsexuals. However, Sender aims to investigate how this feeling is shown through the different texts of the documentaries and mainstream media. Sender finds that in documentaries, Bono has more control over his image. In *Becoming Chaz* Bono showed his transition through different steps, such as using hormone treatment and top surgery. By doing so, the document portrayed Bono "as a body-in-transition" (Sender, 2013, p. 303). In

Being Chaz, Bono appeared with a male body, representing a stabilization. Sender demonstrates that the different representations of Bono in two documentary films show the interconnection of movement and specificity of Bono's transition. His different portrayals in two documentaries are also educative and political tools to help audiences learn about being transgender and to promote transgender visibility. By contrast, in *DWTS*, he had to follow the requirements of the show and faced difficulty in expressing his male body. The references in *DWTS* regarding the relationship between Bono and his family differ from that in his documentaries. While in the documentaries, the texts showed both his biological and extended family, *DWTS* only focused on his biological family. Thus, Sender argues that the show reaffirms the norms of gender and conventional family roles (Sender, 2013).

Lovelock (2017) examines the representations of two US celebrities, Caitlyn Jenner and Jazz Jennings in the mass media and argues that both celebrities have become well-known thanks to the cross-over of their transgender identities with their celebrity status. Both Caitlyn Jenner and Jazz Jennings are stars of reality TV shows. Before coming out as a transgender person, Caitlyn Jenner was famous for being an athlete in the Olympics of 1976. Jenner also is known as a member of the famous family, the Kardashians. Jennings is much younger than Jenner. Besides being known as a teen reality TV show star, Jennings is famous for being a transgender activist. The writer interrogates their reality TV shows "I am Caitlyn" and "I am Jazz" through which Caitlyn Jenner and Jazz Jennings have tried to represent themselves as transgender persons and sought the recognition of their audiences, who are mostly assumed to be white cisgender persons. By analysing the way that they appear in interviews for magazines and in their own TV shows, the author demonstrates that both Jenner's and Jennings's transgender narratives are developed within celebrity culture and the commercial logic of the media. The author places Caitlyn Jenner and Jazz Jennings in the

history of trans representations in American popular culture that date back 60 years, starting with Christine Jorgenson in the 1950s. The concept of being authentic to oneself has been the key principle in the commercial logic and cultural work of stardom and celebrity (Lovelock, 2017, p. 741). Jenner's and Jennings' shows follow this principle, the authenticity of celebrity overlapping with the authenticity of the transgender person. Similar to Barker-Plummer, Lovelock argues the concept of the "wrong body" has become prominent in the media and is considered to be the normative narrative of transgender subjectivity throughout popular culture. Thus, in both Jenner's and Jennings' shows the "wrong body" discourse has been used to help them articulate their transgender identity. The author contends that by reiterating the "wrong body" script, the narratives of transgender representations in these two cases are trapped in gender norms. For example, to ensure the viability of commercial media, Jennings' image was constructed in line with norms such as she likes "dating boys" (Lovelock, 2017, p. 745), and she wishes to be a mother. Her representations in the "docusoap" show her normal life as a female teenager girl which is similar to that of the imagined cisgender viewers. The aim of these representations is not only to show Jennings' gender authenticity but also to show commonalities with her cisgender audiences despite her mismatched corporeality. The author argues that Jennings became a celebrity through the process of realising and subsequently "coming out" to affirm her authentic female essence. Her representation partly expands the parameters of the "human" subject that is conventionally coded as white, heterosexual and cisgender by including her transgender identity. Shaped through the discourse of celebrity, however, her representation constructs an ideal version of acceptable transgender life within the parameters of the human that excludes other versions of transgender life. Similarly, in Jenner's case, her representation is constructed through the image of a gorgeous, white and powerful female transgender person who attempts to save another vulnerable transgender person. In her reality show, Jenner's

generosity was shown through her financial support of Blossom, a black transgender woman. When Blossom was rejected from nursing school because of her transgender identity, Jenner presented Blossom's story on her show in order to protect her. Lovelock argues, however, this created a boundary between her own identity as a white, rich and powerful female transgender person, and Blossom's identity as a poor, black and vulnerable female transgender. By analysing representations of Jenner and Jennings in the media, Lovelock argues that popular culture contributes to promoting transgender representations in a way that assumes a white cisgender audience who will validate and legitimise their transgender identity. Their narratives fail in their pedagogical purpose to include the diversity of identities and exclude other transgender representations (Lovelock, 2017). The study reaffirms the author's argument in a previous article in which Lovelock also examined the representation of Caitlyn Jenner and Nadia Almada, another transgender celebrity who become famous as the winner of the TV show *Big Brother* in 2004, through the reality TV show *Transform Me*. Lovelock concludes that the "wrong body" paradigm has become the prominent explanation for gender transition in popular Anglo-American media and interrogates why and how the "wrong body" discourse becomes ubiquitous for trans identities in the popular media. Lovelock (2016) found that the representations of these two celebrities not only follow the "wrong body" discourse but also adhere to gender norms of female cisgender persons. While the media portrays Jenner as a woman with the physical beauty of a standard female cisgender person, Almada's image is that of an imperfect transgender person in the show *Big Brother* in 2004 who has become more beautiful as, due to "fashion makeovers and dieting regimes" (Lovelock, 2016, p.2). In the TV show *Transform Me* the media portray three celebrity transwomen to show the audience the progress that makes these transgender persons to become beautiful transwomen through makeovers, fashion and bodily intervention. Clearly, both Almada and Jenner are depicted as desiring to be feminine and their transitions

to beautiful females are regarded as achieving their authentic selves. Such representations may help to make transgender persons feel more accepted but at the same time create the limitation of an 'acceptable' transgender subjectivity which is self-sufficient, normatively feminine, and in which the pursuit of happiness and social integration is enabled by commercial media (Lovelock, 2016).

Transnormativity in the Media

Johnson (2016) introduces the concept of transnormativity "as the specific ideological accountability structure to which transgender persons' presentations and experiences of gender are held accountable" (p. 465). Johnson notes that transnormativity is similar to other terms such as homonormativity in terms of the empowering and constraining aspects of the gender ideology used to locate trans subjectivities because all of these terms contain the idea of a regulatory normative ideology. In this case, transnormativity determines certain trans persons' identifications, characteristics and behaviours as legitimate and prescriptive, while simultaneously marginalizing anyone who denies its norms. The author examines the content of nine documentary films about transgender men specifically. Six of them were selected from a list of documentaries on the website *Trans- Academics*; and three of them were found in the internet. These nine films were made from 1997 to 2011. The findings of this study are consistent with the analyses of Lovelock regarding the discourse of a wrong body and the necessity of medical intervention to promote trans identity (p.475). Johnson concludes that transnormativity plays a crucial role in structuring transgender experience, identification and narratives into a hierarchy of legitimacy. The noteworthy point is that the hegemonic ideology of transnormativity is based on a binary medical model and its accompanying standards, regardless of whether transgender persons intend to undertake medical pathways to transition (Johnson,

2016, p.466). The author focuses on the ways that these documentary films strengthen transnormative ideology because most of the narratives of trans men in the documentaries employ the ‘wrong body discourse’. Hence, Johnson critiques transnormativity as being based on a medical model of transition regulating social, medical and legal arrangements. Thus, the concept of transnormativity constrains the diversity of trans identities and silences individuals who are nonconforming to its norms (Johnson, 2016).

Ordinary transgender persons – Self-Representation

Vivien (2011) examines the representations of transgender persons and issues through digital media; the author’s work focuses on how transgender persons’ talk about themselves (all of them are ‘ordinary’ transgender persons). The author argues that transgender persons are commonly portrayed negatively by non-transgender authors. However, in recent years, thanks to the development of technology and new media, transgender persons have more of a chance to depict themselves how they see fit. Focusing on digital storytelling, Vivien claims that digital story opens a chance for a great number of people who used to be excluded from shaping the culture. Their digital stories and the narratives of self are very interesting because they show the problems of the categories of trans identities which attempt to define trans people. The transgender persons in Vivien’s work had significant autonomy in choosing how they wanted to represent themselves. However, their narratives are still influenced by the social context in which diverse sexual and gender identities are contested. To illustrate this argument, Vivien offered a contested landscape of trans-identity in which different scholars have various perspectives on what makes a trans-identity, including both theory of gender as performance and debate on biological factors. Digital narrators also confront risks when coming out by using this kind of self-representation because they are not widely protected by law. Trans storytellers can reach a large audience

as informal advocates; however, some struggle, as they might want to live a 'normal life' and exposure of their stories reduces their privacy. The themes of these digital stories include their physical transition as well as their reconstruction of relationships with friends and family post transition. Within a very short time, trans storytellers have to decide which parts of their life to express, as both the details of their appearance and self-definition change, and their anonymity as well as their safety must be ensured. Highly constructed digital stories allow the storytellers to manage their creation process and the ways their identity as well as their experience is narrated. Vivien concludes that "narratives of self are not only shaped for personal consumption but for those people surrounding us; audiences composed of both intimate and unknown publics" (Vivien, 2011, p. 47). Thus, the audiences that Vivien implies here may be interpreted as both transgender persons themselves, their relatives and friends, and particularly a large number of unknown people who can be cisgender persons. This might also be another reason why self-representation by digital storytelling may face risk and the storytellers had to struggle much to overcome their conflicts when determining whether and how to come out. Vivien analyses three digital stories, two from male-to-female persons and one from a female-to-male individual. They all want to use their narratives and their personal insights to raise awareness of diverse sexual and gender identities as well as to change public attitudes. The narrators also used the mismatched body discourse to describe themselves and to show how much they understand themselves and know who they are. Vivien concludes that although some trans digital storytelling is still told in a traditional way, it cannot be denied that this form of self-representation is contributing to challenging the conventional notions of gender identity and transnormativity (Vivien, 2011).

Representation of Transgender in Asian Media

In Asian countries beyond Vietnam literature on transgender people and their representation in the media is scarce. Zang (2013) has examined the representation of transgender people since 1949 in *The People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China, to track the visibility of transgender people in China through different periods. Zang (2013) argues that there remains a common phenomenon that transgender people are visible but conflated with other sexual identities in studies where the label “trans” or “queer” appears in the title. Zang suggests that representations of transgender persons have become more positive over time. There were three major stages studied. The first stage, from 1949 to 1976, the Maoist period, ignored and silenced the representation of transgender persons because they were seen as shameful and immoral criminals. Their gender performance was seen as an anti-revolutionary act. In the second stage from 1978 to 2000, known as the reform and opening up period, there were breakthroughs in sex reassignment surgery in medical science and with it heated moral debate. This period ended with the reinforced pathologization of transgenderism, but it also brought the issue into public view. The last stage from 2001 onwards marks the time when homosexuality was removed from the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders. Since then the representation of transgender issues by the *People's Daily* has become more positive. The newspaper shows an attempt to question gender conventions following legal progress in the acknowledgement of the human rights of transgender people (Zang, 2013).

In summary, even though existing international studies show increasing interest in media representations of transgender persons, most have treated transgender

persons as a subgroup of their broader research populations. This is common both in Western countries as well as Asian countries. In Asian countries, studies on transgender representation in the media are particularly scarce. Only one piece of work was found in China and there are no works on transgender representation in the media in which transgender persons are treated as the key group in Vietnam. Where transgender persons are the key target group, most research examines representations on screen, such as films, YouTube, TV shows and documentaries. These studies have contributed to important findings of the prevailing heteronormative and transnormative hegemony, the dominance of wrong body discourse, and the ongoing process of transphobia. This literature review highlights the difference between the narratives of transgender celebrities and the narratives of ‘ordinary’ transgender persons because of their difference in social positions and their purpose of coming out. While the narratives of transgender celebrities tend to adhere to gender binaries, self-representations of ordinary (and some celebrity) transgender persons are believed to contribute to challenging the transnormativity.

In her book *Learning Queer Identity in the Digital Age* (2016), Seibler claims that online media, particularly e-newspapers, demonstrate their power to shift peoples’ perception. But this growing form of media has not been examined much in relation to transgender persons. We do not know whether the representation of transgender persons and issues in online media are consistent with their representation as found in previous studies of other forms of media. This thesis aims to contribute to this gap in the academic literature by examining the portrayals of transgender people in online media in Vietnam.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

Online media is a broad category. Official electronic newspaper (e-newspaper) sites and private e-news sites are the focus of this research. Recent research shows that internet users in Vietnam have reached 35 million people, one-third of the Vietnamese population. The development of the internet has facilitated a robust social media culture that has impacted the landscape of journalism in Vietnam. Almost all print media outlets have their own online versions which can transmit and multiply the distribution of information at high speeds thanks to interactive functions such as “like”, “comment” and “share” (Nguyen, 2015). Therefore, no one could deny the profound influence of online media in bringing knowledge, shaping perception and constructing new ideology. Siebler claims that with the emergence and blossoming of the internet for more than a decade, today it is easy to access the world of queer people. However, online content, posting and images are not free of the problems associated with the stereotypes of sex, gender and identity that underpin heteronormativity in Vietnamese society (Siebler, 2016). If misinformation and stereotypes exist in the representations of transgender persons in online media, these norms become widespread among the community, affecting transgender persons’ lives.

The media in Vietnam operates under State control. The Law of Vietnamese Journalism defines the term “Electronic newspaper” (e-newspaper) (Bao dien tu) as a kind of journalism using texts, photos and sounds transmitted through the internet, including both electronic newspapers and electronic magazines. The Law defines the term “News site” (Trang thong tin dien tu tong hop) as journalistic information products of bodies, organizations and enterprises which provide information by posting links to the sources of news or quoting the sources of news under the law of intellectual property. According to the Decree 72/2013 ND-CP (Manage, Supply, and Use of the Internet and News on the Internet) and

the Law of Vietnamese Journalism, Vietnam does not allow private companies to set up their own official newspapers including e-newspapers. Media companies may set up their own sites, but they do not have right to produce media output to publish on their sites. These sites may only pick up media items from official e-newspapers and repost them on their private sites. Therefore, in essence, current private e-news sites can cover the same concerning issues as official e-newspapers, but they are not recognized as official e-newspapers. However, many private media companies still produce their own media content covering news, science, the economy, culture, sport, entertainment, social welfare, with advertisements, while concurrently cooperating with government sites by posting and reposting their items as a way to legitimize their media products (Trinh, 2016). Thus, despite the fact that there has been no private e-newspaper acknowledged by law, private media items do exist in reality.

In this context, I chose to investigate five online sites to ensure a diversity of voices from both official governmental channels and private channels. They are *Vnexpress.net*, *Motthegioi.vn*, *Vietnamnet.vn*, *Thanhvien.vn* and *Kenh14.vn*. Of these five Vietnamese sites, four sites are official channels which are e-newspapers managed by the government and one site is a private site – a non-official media channel. I chose these sites by combining information about their ranking with other criteria. Their ranking, that is their popularity, is announced in the report on top sites in Vietnam delivered by the company Alexa, a global pioneer in the world of monthly media analysis. At the time I chose these sites, *Vnexpress.net*, an official e-newspaper managed by the Ministry of Science and Technology, ranked number seven of all in Vietnam, including news, entertainment, search engines, YouTube and Facebook. Among the official e-newspaper channel, it ranks number one. *Vietnamnet.vn* is the second most popular official e-newspaper; it is managed by the Ministry of Information and Communication of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This site ranked number

21 in the ranking of all sites and number 3 of all official e-newspaper sites. *Vietnamnet.vn* has historical status because it is the first official Vietnamese electronic news site. The third governmental site is *Thanhnienvn.vn*. Even though this site is only ranked number 50, it is the official voice of the Vietnamese Youth Union. *Motthegioi.vn*, an official government run e-news site run by the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations has also been included because it has pioneered a specific column for LGBT content. The last channel, *Kenh14.vn*, is a private channel for teenagers ranking number 14 of all sites and number one as a private channel for teenagers. This collection of five sites will offer insight into how different popular official e-newspapers depict the representations of transgender persons in Vietnam. Additionally, these five sites will also demonstrate the emphasis on what type of media is targeted at Vietnamese youth.

To collect data for this study, I searched all types of online posts on these five sites regarding transgender persons, such as news, stories and photos from January 2015 through to December 2016. I wanted to examine the representations of transgender persons in recent times. Moreover, due to the rise of the LGBT movement in Vietnam including the first Viet Pride parade in 2012, the last five years have seen Vietnam witness an increase in the visibility of transgender persons in online media when compared with their images in the media before 2012. During 2015-2016, there have even been some reality television shows with transgender celebrity participants. The media became interested in covering their stories alongside their involvement in the shows. Finally, this two-year period allows me to include coverage of a critical event in relation to transgender persons. The Vietnamese Civil Codes was amended on 24 November 2015 after Vietnamese activists and the LGBTQ community advocated for change in the law in order to give transgender persons more legal rights.

Over the two-year period I have collected every item on the five sites that mentions anything to do with transgender people. Using key words for searching “Nguoi chuyen gioi” (transgender persons) on Google, I found 536 online items. I read all these articles and chose two clusters of articles that were numerically significant in which were of interest because they reflected international research, and/or they related to important developments in Vietnamese politics. The first is the subject of transgender celebrities. The second is the representations of transgender persons in relation to law reform. There are various other themes discussed in the Vietnamese online media, but I focus on these two themes because they were predominant. From here on, I consider only the articles that are applicable to these two themes. When accessing each item, there were links to other articles where the same content appeared. I tracked all these items too to avoid missing any relevant information. There were 155 items related to celebrities and 64 items related to law reform. Throughout my thesis, I use Vietnamese when mentioning the titles of the articles and put the translation in the bracket. I only use English translation when quoting their contents. I translated by myself. However, because of Vietnamese writing style, sometimes I found difficult to find the right English word choice for expression. The translation was checked by a friend of mine who is now also a student of Women’s Studies at Flinders University.

To analyse the data, I have applied approaches used in feminist media studies in order to investigate both overt meanings and underlying meanings in news articles on transgender persons. This research pays attention to the photos appearing in news articles to assess how these photos, as well as written text, represent transgender persons. Content analysis is used to observe the kinds of transgender persons that are represented in the online sites. Content analysis focuses on examining obvious manifest media content and creates objective,

systematic and quantitative description (van Zoonen, 1994). In making these observations I asked the following questions:

What was the proportion of female-to-male and male-to-female transgender persons?

- Was “she” or “he” used to refer to female-to-male transgender persons?
- Was “he” or “she” used for male-to-female transgender persons?
- Were there any ethnic minority transgender people or were all ethnic majority?
- What nationalities were represented?
- Were those represented youth or adults?

I note however that while I use content analysis I am not mainly conducting quantitative analysis. The results of my content analysis are reported narratively. Semiotics will also be employed to analyse signs appearing in the media text. Semiotics refers to a linguistic analysis method of analysis in which two elements of a sign (which can be any text), signifier and signified, are considered. According to van Zoonen, the meanings of a sign should be understood not only from the relationship between signifier and signified, but also from its relation to other signs. A sign can combine with other signs within the same system to form its meanings or the meaning of a sign can be derived from its relation to its absent counterpart (van Zoonen, 1994). The relationships of these signs relating to the representation of transgender people, including photos, in these five sites will be scrutinized carefully to detect not only the apparent meanings but also the underlying or suggested meanings.

By using semiotic approaches together with content analysis my investigation of texts and photos will enable consideration of a range of issues:

- the stigmatization of transgender persons through their representations;
- micro-aggression towards transgender persons;
- identification of binary systems of meaning (male sexed body/female sexed body; men's roles/women's roles; medical treatment/non-medical treatment; beautiful appearance/ugly appearance; authentic/fake; plausible passing/not plausible passing; successful transition/unsuccessful transition);
- the nature of negative portrayals of transgender persons).

These issues of concern have been identified by a number of authors in the literature on the representations of transgender persons (see Lovelock, 2017; Riggs, 2014; Barker-Plummer, 2013; Johnson, 2016; Sender, 2013; Willox, 2003; Sloop, 2000; Mocarski et al., 2013). I am interested to explore if, and how, transgender persons in Vietnam might be represented in a way similar to the representations currently found in western countries.

CHAPTER 3: CELEBRITY

The rise to celebrity status of some transgender people is a global phenomenon which has contributed to the rising visibility of transgender persons in the public sphere. For example, the visibility of Caitlyn Jenner on *Vanity Fair*'s cover in 2015 introduced a series of transgender celebrities appearing in the media (Hamad, 2016). This chapter examines how transgender celebrities are represented in the online media in Vietnam. I chose this theme because of the prominence of transgender celebrity representations in the media during my two-year period of interest in the matter. According to Daniel Boorstin "The celebrity is a person who is well-known for his well-knownness" (Boorstin, 1982, p. 49). The discourses of the celebrity have social functions (Nguyen, 2011) and can combine with the discourse of gender to create a new ideology in the media. I will examine the dominant representations of the most famous celebrities in the media. I argue that although transgender celebrities in Vietnam have won some respect from the media, there remains a subtle degree of transphobia. The narrative slant on the beauty of transgender celebrity reinforces heteronormativity. The articulation of transgender celebrities in the Vietnamese media also employs the "wrong body" discourse which marginalizes anyone who is of non-binary gender.

I examine 155 articles on transgender celebrities. The issues which attract most attention in these articles are the celebrities' real lives and their self-revelations, aligning with Lovelock's argument that "the concept of the authentic self has long been central to the commercial logic and cultural work of stardom and celebrity" (2017, p. 741). There are 5 transgender celebrities reported frequently within the 155 articles found (see Table 1). Of these 5 people, Caitlyn Jenner, a reality television star, is from the USA; Nong Poy is an actress and Thai transgender Miss World; and Huong Giang Idol, Lam Khanh Chi (also known as Lam Chi

Khanh) and Le Thien Hieu are all Vietnamese singers. Apart from these 5 celebrities, Cindy Thai Tai was also covered in two articles on two different sites; she will be considered too on account of her being the first Vietnamese transgender celebrity. Of all these celebrities, only Le Thien Hieu is a transgender man, the others are transgender women. Their ages range from 21 to 65. The youngest is Le Thien Hieu and the oldest is Caitlyn Jenner. These articles did not mention the ethnicity of these transgender celebrities. This can be assumed that either all transgender celebrities in the media are from dominant ethnic group or authors did not have information. During the chosen period, the articles on transgender celebrities were mostly produced, and varied in frequency, depending on events in the media world. For example, when Caitlyn Jenner had her photos published in *Vanity Fair* magazine, articles about her appeared at the same time in *Vnexpress.net*, *Thanhnienvn*, *Motthegioi.vn* and *Kenh14.vn*. *Vietnamnet.vn* was the exception; there was no coverage of her on this site at that time. Both Huong Giang Idol and Lam Khanh Chi participated in reality television shows. Le Thien Hieu suddenly became a star overnight for his hit song when the first episode of the television show *Sing my Song* was broadcast. Nong Poy has been famous in Vietnamese media since 2012. Although Nong Poy appeared in the media, I will not examine her representation much and will not put her in the list below (table 1) because the narratives about her were similar to those about Huong Giang Idol or Lam Khanh Chi. All five online sites gave coverage to all of these celebrities, however, *Thanhnienvn* made up nearly half of the media items (62 articles) while the rest of the items were distributed evenly among the remaining sites. On average, on *Thanhnienvn*, there were more than two articles every month while the others had one article per month. Generally, articles appeared in various columns on all five sites. The e-newspaper *Motthegioi.vn* published all their articles on transgender celebrities in its 'LGBT' column. Most of the other articles were found in columns on 'culture' and

‘entertainment’ in the other sites. The media covered events happening in the real lives of these transgender celebrities.

The content reported on included the participation of transgender celebrities in reality television shows, what they look like, their love stories and what they were doing in everyday life. By doing so, the media covered a wide range of aspects of their lives and this coverage is similar to that of other celebrities in general. There are more articles on male-to-female transgender celebrities (123 articles) than on female-to-male transgender celebrities (20 articles). The media items vary in length with the texts ranging from 200 words to more than 2000 words. Most articles have a lot of photos attached. Some of them are photos and captions only. In all five sites, numerous authors’ names were found many times in various articles. We can presume that these authors are journalists, contributing their work on transgender issues or the celebrity topics regularly to these sites. *Kenh14.vn* is not considered as official electronic newspapers and does not have right to produce its own news articles; hence, all articles in this site are reposted from the other official sites and magazines. In fact, these articles might be written by *Kenh14.vn*’s own writers but they were sent to be published on an official channel first before being reposted on its own channel. Some articles were also reposted among these sites. *Thanhkien.vn*, *Vnexpress.net*, and *Vietnamnet.vn* published authors who followed particular celebrities. For instance, on *Vnexpress.net* all the articles on Caitlyn Jenner were written by Di Ca; on *Thanhkien.vn* a series of articles on Huong Giang Idol were covered by Chim Go Kien, the articles on Lam Khanh Chi by Ha Ngan and the articles on Caitlyn Jenner by Nguyen Thuy; while on *Vietnamnet.vn* the articles on Lam Khanh Chi were written by Quynh Anh.

Of the five sites, it appears that the authors at *Thanhkien.vn*, the official e-newspaper of the Vietnamese Youth Union, where nearly half of all articles

considered here were published, spending time in producing their articles because most of their outputs are long and written in-house while those on other sites might be shorter, reposted or sourced from international reports. For example, most articles on *Motthegioi.vn*, the official e-newspaper which has a specific LGBT column, are news items sourced from international media. As for, *Kenh14.vn*, the private e-news site, all articles are reposted because of not being allowed to produce their own articles outright. All articles used the term “chuyen gioi” in Vietnamese which is the equivalent of the term “transgender” in English, to refer to both male-to-female and female-to-male transgender celebrities.

In general, transgender celebrities have gained a degree of respect from the media. Most of the articles showed the respect of the authors toward the transgender celebrities which they wrote about. There were articles which acknowledged the influence and contribution of some transgender celebrities toward the development of international culture. Some of the articles were about the achievements of transgender celebrities in other countries. In others, the authors showed their sympathy for the disadvantages and discrimination experienced by transgender persons. Although it cannot be denied that there are some improvement in the portrayal of transgender people in general and transgender celebrities in particular, the representation of transgender celebrities still remains somewhat problematic.

TABLE 1

Transgender Celebrities	Description
Caitlyn Jenner	Born in 1949. Male-to-female transgender person. American television show celebrity.
Huong Giang Idol	Born in 1987. Male-to-female transgender person. A singer who participated in the reality television shows <i>Vietnam Idol 2012</i> and <i>the Amazing Race Vietnam 2014</i> .
Lam Khanh Chi	Born in 1977. Male-to-female transgender person. A singer who participated in the game show <i>Secret Mission 2015</i> .
Cindy Thai Tai	Born in 1981. The first Vietnamese Male-to-female transgender celebrity. Make-up stylist and singer.
Le Thien Hieu	Born in 1991. A Female-to-male transgender celebrity. Famous for his song on the television show <i>Sing my Song 2016</i> .

Transphobia: Mistaken pronouns

Caitlyn Jenner, born in 1949, has become famous not only in the USA but overseas as well for being a star of a reality television show and a member of the Kardashian family, as well as for her athletic career. Before her transition, Jenner was known as Bruce Jenner and was the step-father of Kim Kardashian. When transitioning, she asked everyone to call her by her new name, Caitlyn. Her appearance on *Vanity Fair's* magazine cover was featured on a wide range of Vietnamese online media all around the same time. The problem is the way that the media covered this event. Much of the media used her previous gender

pronouns and titles to refer Jenner in the title, such as an abundance of articles written by Di Ca on *Vnexpress.net*: “Bo duong Kim Kardashian cong khai song nhu phu nu” (Kim’s step-father publicly lives like a woman) (Di Ca, 2015a); “Bo duong chuyen gioi cua Kim roi nuoc mat tren san khau” (Kim’s step-father cries on stage) (Di Ca, 2015c); “Me Kim Kardashian om chong cu chuyen gioi” (Kim’s mother hugs transgender ex-husband) (Di Ca, 2015b); or the article of Sao Mai: “Bo duong chuyen gioi cua Kim dep nhat tuan voi dam trang” (Kim’s step-father is the most beautiful of the week in white dress) (Sao Mai, 2015). The titles “step-father”, “father” and “ex-husband” have been used many times in many articles not only on *Vnexpress.net* but on other online sites including *Thanhnien.vn*, *Motthegioi.vn* and *Kenh14.vn*. In addition, in the content of these articles, the authors reiterated Caitlyn Jenner’s previous name “Mr. Bruce” and the pronoun “he”. In one article Di Ca wrote “Mr. Bruce Jenner, ex-husband of Kim Kardashian’s mother, appears as a woman with new name Caitlyn Jenner” (Di Ca, 2015a). In another article on *Thanhnien.vn*, Nguyen (2015a) commented: “Mr. Jenner was comfortable in the public with long hair, painted nails and make-up” (Nguyen, 2015a). It is understandable that the old identity of Jenner be reiterated to remind readers who Jenner is but the ways that the writers narrated Jenner’s past over-emphasized her transition to serve the curiosity of readers. In many of the articles there was an inconsistent use of pronouns. Authors used both “he” and “she” as well as “him” and “her” to refer to Jenner in one article. So far Caitlyn Jenner has been considered “father” of Kim Kardashian and Kendall Jenner, and “ex-husband” of Kris rather than her expected identity - a woman. By using these pronouns and titles, authors reminded the readers of Caitlyn Jenner’s old identity - a man - thereby trivializing the current identity of Caitlyn.

Apart from Caitlyn Jenner and within nearly 155 articles on celebrities in general (except Huong Giang Idol and Lam Khanh Chi, the two famous singers who have gained remarkable reputation and high status in show business), most other transgender celebrities were mentioned with their pre-transition names first. This

kind of writing stimulates the curiosity of readers by reminding them of the past gender of these people, but it also contributes to the disrespect of transgender people.

Transphobia: Odd but Costly Details

Lovelock (2017) contends that the binary of transgender and cisgender is constructed through social discourse. Transgender persons have been believed to be gender dysphoric; not many people have this problem in a world in which we now call cisgender “normal” (Lovelock, 2017). This assumption was critiqued by queer theorists like Judith Butler. According to Lovelock, the assumption that “cisgender” is normal has created a boundary which frames all identities other than “cisgender” outside normalcy. The assumption of the transgender and cisgender binary has affected mainstream media in a way that readers/viewers are presumed to be cisgender people (Lovelock, 2017). As such, authors and media producers often construct their media output relating to transgender persons as oddly as possible to create shock value. I argue one way that transgender celebrities are constructed as shocking is when writers focus on their transition stories.

This could be seen clearly in the case of Caitlyn Jenner. Most articles on her dwelt on her transition. All writers focus on how Bruce Jenner became Caitlyn Jenner, assuming that most readers would be curious about this issue. This belief has become the epistemological basis for the media to continue producing such media output. Aiming at serving a large number of readers who are cisgender, the narratives of transition and transgender as strange have become a hot topic in the media. A series of the articles on Caitlyn Jenner showed the curiosity in every step of her transition, making the story of Caitlyn Jenner their most shocking story

ever. For example, the article “Khi mẹ cô Kim lên tiếng” (When Ms. Kim’s mother raised her voice) published on *ThanhNien.vn*, Dao wrote:

Let’s forget the story of super ‘hot’ girl Taylor Swift with the richest DJ in the world, Calvin Harris. Even the rumor of the divorce of Ben Affleck and Jennifer Garner would not make everyone “start” as the story of the step-father of Ms. Kim ‘super breast’, Mr. Bruce Jenner has become...Ms. Caitlyn Jenner.

(Dao, 2015)

The author thus constructs the story of Jenner as shocking and worthy of attention because of the character’s transition. The author puts quotation marks around “*giật mình*” (start) which could be translated into English as movement of the body because of a very surprising thing. Furthermore, the punctuation here is the three dots (...) used to express a dramatic, surprising and unpredictable point. Another detail which is reiterated in many articles is that Jenner has 6 children with three wives and has just become a woman. Nguyen Thuy has two articles on Jenner on *ThanhNien.vn*. In both articles, the author surprised readers by writing: “Having 6 children and getting a gold medal in the Olympic 1976, Bruce Jenner’s transition made everyone fall on one’s back” (Nguyen, 2015a). In this sentence, the original Vietnamese word that is equivalent to the phrase “*to fall on one’s back*” is “*ngã ngửa*”. Using these words, the author means this story was exceedingly astonishing to everyone. Here the author does not merely report on responses to Jenner’s transition but creates them for “everyone”. In another article, the author wrote: “*The man who has experienced 3 wives and has 6 children proclaimed a new name Caitlyn Jenner in order to fit with his female appearance*” (Nguyen, 2015b). Nadal defines microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward members or oppressed groups” (Nadal, 2008, p.23).

Accordingly, Nadal and his colleagues proposed 12 types of microaggression towards transgender and gender-nonconforming persons based on their research into transgender people's experiences. One of those categories is endorsement of gendernormative and binary culture or behaviors which deny transgender identities (Nadal et al., 2012). Drawing on this concept, comments on Jenner mentioned above imply a denial of Jenner's identity and constitute microaggression. The script was reiterated with different expressions, but all conveyed a clear message: Jenner got married with three women and has six children – all signifiers of masculinity; she is very strong and manly and so how can she be woman.

One of the most common concerns of the media when featuring celebrities is their love stories. Thus, it is not so strange that the online media has a series of articles in regard to the love story of Huong Giang Idol, a Vietnamese singer famous for being a beautiful MTF transgender person. However, the problem lies in the ways that transgender celebrities are represented in these love stories. In an interview with Huong Giang's boyfriend reposted on *Vietnamnet.vn*, difficult questions were asked to him:

You used to have relationships with normal girls, did you have any pressure and hesitate when you fell in love with a transgender person like Huong Giang?

(Zing, 2015)

In this question, marginalization is evident through the language. Although the author did not say that Huong Giang is abnormal because she is a transgender person, by making a comparison between Huong Giang and "normal girls" who could be interpreted as cisgender/non-transgender girls, the author devalued Huong Giang's transgender identity. This constitutes transphobia, defined as

“societal discrimination and stigma of individuals who do not conform to traditional norms of sex and gender” (Sugano et al., 2006, p. 217).

When Le Thien Hieu, a transgender man, appeared on the reality television show *Sing my Song 2016*, his song was immediately loved by everyone and he has become well-known since then. Born in 1991, Le Thien Hieu is the youngest celebrity among those discussed in this thesis. His song brought him fame, however, in a series of articles after his night on television, the topic in which the media was most interested was his transgender identity - he came out on the show. The detail that Le Thien Hieu is a transgender person was employed to make the articles more interesting. On *Thanhnienvn*, an article portrayed him:

With a low and warm voice, manly face, handsome, and strong behaviours, everyone could hardly think the boy they were faced with at first sight used to be a girl named Le Phuong Thao.

(Le & Luu, 2016)

In another article, the writer invokes shock right from the title: “Vua manly vua hat hay khong ai nghi thi sinh “Sing my Song” nay la nguoi chuyen gioi” (Both being manly and singing well, no one could think that the candidate of *Sing my Song* is a transgender person). Though this acknowledged the identity that Le Thien Hieu expects by using adjectival norms for masculinity, the article aimed to shock its readers. This kind of narrative was also reiterated in other articles on other sites.

Narratives of Beauty and Success

Beauty is a common topic discussed in many articles about three famous celebrities: Huong Giang Idol and Lam Khanh Chi from Vietnam, and Nong Poy from Thailand. Beauty has become a discourse that the media uses to assess

whether the transition of a transgender person is successful. Accordingly, the media is concerned greatly with how these celebrities look. The underlying question is “Do they look as feminine as cisgender women?” I argue that narratives of the beauty of female transgender celebrities adhere to heteronormativity, strengthening narrow definitions of feminine embodiment. Moreover, an overwhelming focus on beauty marginalizes other transgender persons who do not wish to or cannot conform to the common beauty standards of normative femininity.

Huong Giang was born in 1987. She has been a singer since participating in the reality television show *Vietnam Idol 2012*, a competition whose quality was reputed to be low at the time. Some people asked whether Huong Giang was a means to rescue the show and draw public attention to the show (Phuong Hoang, 2013). After the show, she became a celebrity and gathered coverage in the media. Since then, the word “Idol” is often attached to her name as a brand of hers. It is not difficult to find an abundance of articles which portray Huong Giang as the most beautiful transgender person in Vietnam and Nong Poy as the most beautiful transgender person in Thai show business. Huong Giang was reported on in all five sites with a lot of photos to show her beauty and her body. The common comment about Huong Giang Idol’s beauty is that she is one of the most beautiful transgender people in Vietnam because of her ethereal face, white or smooth skin, and perfect body. For instance, in the article “Huong Giang Idol: Toi chua the so sanh voi Nong Poy” (Huong Giang Idol: I am not as beautiful as Nong Poy), Huong Giang’s beauty is described:

Recently, Huong Giang Idol shared her portrait photos, showing her ‘perfect’ body. In comparison with Vietnamese celebrities in show business, Huong Giang is described as having the most natural beauty, from her body to her face and her clear skin.

(Chim Go Kien, 2015a)

According to Hunter (2011), the concept of white-skinned beauty has spread around the world, particularly to nations which were colonized by Western countries. Hunter demonstrated that this beauty concept is a product of “multiple social institutions” including mass media (Hunter, 2011, p. 143). This concept is associated with a lifestyle of “whiteness, modernity, sophistication, beauty, power, and wealth” (Hunter, 2011, p.144). Tzanelli (2014) argues that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but eyes are trained by social institutions, such as the media, to see, expect and interpret reality in specific (plausible) ways” (Tzanelli, 2014, p. 2). The beauty of Huong Giang Idol not only excludes transgender persons who do not have white skin but also adheres to the conventional Western influenced norm of femininity.

Huong Giang Idol is not only described as beautiful but also as sexy. On *ThanhNien.vn*, one writer wrote: “She is so self-confident to wear sexy costumes to show her sexy body, especially when she performs in bars ” (Anh Tai, 2015). In this article, the writer described Huong Giang’s confidence when she performed in a bar. The article included photos of Huong Giang which show her in swimwear in different postures performing on the stage. The writer repeated the words “sexy” and “attractive” when writing captions for these photos (Anh Tai, 2015).



Huong Giang Idol had a hot performance in a bar in HCM city



The female singer was confident in a sexy costume and drew much attention



Huong Giang has become more and more sexy



The female singer performed so attractively that the audience could not take their eyes off her

(Anh Tai, 2015).

On *ThanhNien.vn*, Mai Ngọc introduced Huong Giang's new music video named "Who is most beautiful tonight?". In her own work, she endorses beauty

competition. The writer talked about Huong Giang’s beauty and included photos of her in the media conference introducing the product, to illustrate her beauty (Mai Ngoc, 2015). In these photos, Huong Giang wore a long dress with a low neckline and a long slit to show off her body.



Huong Giang Idol is assessed as the most beautiful transgender singer of Vietnam



Huong Giang is sexy in a long dress, revealing her breasts on the day of releasing her MV

(Mai Ngoc, 2015)

In another article, Huong Giang is a model, a character of Christmas who welcomes in the new season. Her beauty is represented through a lot of “hot” photos. The article’s title is “*Huong Giang Idol heats up Christmas Eve with sexy wears*” (Luong, 2015). In these photos, Huong Giang wore red costumes including merely underwear or short suits which reveal her body and her breasts, posing with a male model. These photos invite readers to read Huong Giang as a sexual object of the man, waiting for him when she sat on the man’s thigh or leaned on him with her eyes closed. The caption for these photos also described Huong Giang as a hot and sexy girl, coding her body as a sexual object.



Huong Giang Idol is hot on the threshold of Christmas (Luong Van, 2015)

In another article by Chim Go Kien (2015c) Huong Giang's body was shown in a set of photos in underwear to promote her new music video. In these photos, Huong Giang wore black and red underwear, sitting or lying on a bed or sofa. In these photos Huong Giang's body and her postures signify sexuality.





Huong Giang is confident to show her smooth body in “Who is most beautiful tonight?”
(Chim Go Kien, 2015c)

In all the above articles, the writers also used many adjectives to describe her beautiful face as well as her body, such as “hot”, “sexy” and “attractive”.

The problem here is the repetition of the script that Huong Giang is a successful transgender person because of her beauty. This reiteration creates an overstated association of transgender with beauty and limits the acknowledgement of other transgender persons who might not achieve or do not wish to conform to the beauty standard that the media has constructed based on Huong Giang’s embodiment. Van Zoonen claims that the “core element of western patriarchal culture is the display of woman as spectacles to be looked at, subjected to the gaze of the (male) audience” (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 87). On the basis of looking at photos of Huong Giang in the media, it could be concluded that patriarchal

visual culture is not only a feature of western society but also of Vietnamese society as well. In these photos, Huong Giang performs as a sexual object or decoration under a male's gaze.

Lam Khanh Chi is another transgender singer. She was born in 1977 and is older than Huong Giang. Lam Khanh Chi became famous for her singing career before she underwent surgery. Although Lam Khanh Chi is also considered a beautiful transgender celebrity, she has not received as many positive compliments as Huong Giang Idol. In an article written by Trieu Du (2016a) on *Thanhvien.vn*, the author showed sympathy for Lam Khanh Chi:

After her determined sex-reassignment, the thing she wished to gain from the audience was recognition of her as a woman. Seemingly, that wish would become true, but her beauty suffered criticism from the public because of an imperfect transition...many features on her face are quite big and not soft.

(Trieu Du, 2016a)

By drawing attention to what would normally be considered masculine features, the author reinforced the beauty standard which favors the traditional standard of female beauty. This author wrote another article about Lam Khanh Chi's beauty. The problem appeared outright in the title "*Lam Chi Khanh khang dinh minh la nu chuan 100%*" (*Lam Chi Khanh affirmed to be a real woman 100%*) (Trieu Du, 2016b). The title of the article is sensational and draws attention from readers, implying that there might be different degrees of being a woman. In this article, Lam Chi Khanh was quoted:

Now, I possess a perfect beauty, my body is not as ugly as before. I am confident to affirm that I am a woman 100%. I will take the sexy fashion style as a beautiful and successful lady.

(Trieu Du, 2016b)

This article discusses the beauty of Lam Khanh Chi after she underwent sex-reassignment surgery and gradually perfected her beauty. Both the writer and Lam Khanh Chi deployed the normative standard of beauty. This articulation of Lam Khanh Chi also engaged the concept of “how real is a transgender woman?”. The narrative implies that before undergoing sex-reassignment surgery and beautifying cosmetic surgery, Lam Khanh Chi was not a “real woman”. In other words, what makes a transgender person a real woman is a female sexed body assessed against beauty standards of normative femininity. By representing Lam Khanh Chi with these standards a boundary is created around transgender identity, indirectly rejecting anyone who could not meet the requirements of normative beauty.

In some other articles, Lam Khanh Chi’s breasts were the object of comment. The same problem arose when the writer put the word “breasts” in quotation marks as in the case of other female transgender celebrities discussed elsewhere above. In an article about Lam Khanh Chi’s birthday, accompanied by photos she provided, she wears different dresses, revealing her shoulders and her breasts. The beauty of her body was commented on in the captions under the photos





*Costumes of Lam Chi Khanh show her big rounded “breasts”
Photos provided by the characters
(Chim Go Kien, 2015d)*

Although in this article, the photos are provided by Lam Khanh Chi herself, when describing these photos, the author does not show respect to her. In the caption above, the author put the word “breasts” in quotation marks. Although the writer did not state directly what he/she thought, the quotation marks reveal that he/she did not acknowledge Lam Chi Khanh’s body as she prefers. There was not a clear comparison here, but within the ingrained binary between transgender and cisgender, the quotation marks create for readers a difference between the breasts of transgender women and the “breasts” of cisgender women. This suggests that Lam Chi Khanh’s female body is not a real body.

“Wrong Body” Discourse

Barker Plummer (2013) argues that “wrong body” discourse has become a common and inevitable framing for transgender persons in the media in recent years. Lovelock (2016) and Sender (2014) also demonstrate that this discourse has been employed by transgender celebrities when they try to articulate their

transgender identities in the media. Examining the representation of transgender celebrities in the Vietnamese media, I argue that the discourse of transgender identities in Vietnam is consistent with the international discourse of correcting a body.

All celebrities discussed above were portrayed as persons who were born in the “wrong bodies”. In comparison with other transgender celebrities, Cindy Thai Tai, a make-up stylist, singer and actress, the first transgender celebrity in Vietnam, was covered in only two articles on different sites. These two long articles approximate her life-story. These stories were reported by Ha Ngan (2015a) on *Thanhkien.vn* and Ha Anh (2015) on *Motthegioi.vn*. Both articles showed sympathy for Cindy Thai Tai and her past suffering. On *Thanhkien.vn*, Ha Ngan discusses her sad memories of being persecuted by her parents because of her non-gender conforming behaviour and how she overcame the most difficult time after undergoing sex reassignment. On *Motthegioi.vn*, Ha Anh, a friend of Cindy, shows much respect for her. Ha Anh retells how she met Cindy and goes on to talk about Cindy’s life story. Both articles tell of the misery and discrimination that Cindy experienced with much sympathy and admiration. Both of them tell of her love story with her late husband. These two articles may be considered as positive coverage to the extent that they acknowledge Cindy’s identity and show respect for her. Both of them highlight the discourse of “wrong body”. On *Thanhkien.vn* the author quoted Cindy’s words:

At that time, I was small, but I soon knew who I am. I often stood in front of a mirror, looking at it for a long time and asked myself about my male appearance, feeling something strange and difficult to understand, finally I saw deep inside myself I am a girl, a very feminine girl.

(Ha Ngan, 2015a)

On *Motthegioi.vn*, Ha Anh quoted Cindy:

At that time, I was trapped in a male body, I also acted as a gentle man. Some women were fond of me. But I realized that I was always lonely....
(Ha Anh, 2015)

Huong Giang Idol, the transgender celebrity who has been covered the most recently, once again, has also been the subject of long articles about her life. On *Thanhnien.vn*, Ha Ngan wrote a series of two articles about Huong Giang's feelings about her body and her transition. In the content of both articles, Huong Giang shared her feeling of being born in a mismatched body since she was quite young. For instance, Ha Ngan quoted her telling:

When I saw schoolgirls in graceful traditional long dresses at school, riding white mini-bikes and being attractive to boys, I wished I were like them. But it could never come true because I was born in a male body with a female soul.

(Ha Ngan, 2015b)

Although Huong Giang had the same feeling of being in the “wrong body” as Cindy Thai Tai described, she initially thought that she might not need to undertake sex-reassignment surgery. Huong Giang used to think that she did not need to be a (‘real’) woman because the man she loved fell in love with her. She was the one who ended the relationship. The article quoted her saying:

I waited for him for 3 years, finally he loved me in return, but I felt that was enough and I didn't need him anymore. Then I said goodbye to him with pride. I was satisfied because he loved me even though I was not a woman.

(Ha Ngan, 2015b)

However, after that Huong Giang experienced failure, both in her career and love life. She came to think that it was because of her gender identity. Some men

refused her love because she was not a ('real') woman. Huong Giang concluded after these painful experiences: "Life always has a common beauty standard...If I am different, I will never be recognized" (Ha Ngan, 2015c).

Apart from Huong Giang and Cindy Thai Tai, narratives of Le Thien Hieu and Lam Khanh Chi also used the same "wrong body" discourse. These celebrities themselves articulate their identities based on the discourse of the mismatched body which is consistent with the narratives of global celebrities such as Caitlyn Jenner. Unlike other celebrities who have been in show business for a long time, Le Thien Hieu is a new singer and music composer, and he has not undergone sex-reassignment surgery due to a lack of finance. Currently, Le Thien Hieu is only using hormone therapy. He insisted on changing himself in order to find his true body. The article on *Motthegioi.vn* quoted him saying "*I found myself at all costs. Because I could not live with a girl appearance but the soul of a boy*" (Kim Ho, 2016). However, Le Thien Hieu still wishes to save money for having the transition in the future: "Hieu wants to save money to get top quality surgery" (Le & Luu, 2016)

Celebrities here used the narrative of wrong body discourse as a strategy to legitimize their identity in order to adhere to social constructed gender normativity. Barker Plummer contends that while "wrong body" discourse might be a progressive step because it releases transgender persons from the discourse of gender dysphoria, it remains problematic for restricting the diversity of transgender identities and reinforces gender/sex binaries (Barker Plummer, 2013).

In conclusion, transgender celebrities are at the forefront of the growing representation of transgender persons in Vietnam. The articles on transgender celebrities showed some respect for these transgender persons. Nevertheless,

there are still some problems. The way that the media covered the news and stories of these celebrities is still sensationalist. Besides looking at these celebrities as celebrities, the media also exploited their transgender identities as a way to serve their assumed cisgender readers. Patriarchal and heteronormative beauty standards and “wrong body” discourse are evident in their representations and these reinforced gender and sex binaries as well as excluding other identities who do not wish to or cannot adhere to these binaries.

CHAPTER 4: LAW REFORM

As mentioned in the literature review chapter, on 24 November 2015, the Vietnam National Assembly passed a bill to allow sex-reassignment surgery to be available in Vietnam and to legally recognize people who have undergone sex-reassignment surgery in their gender of choice. This landmark event is considered to be a step forward for the transgender rights. However, I argue that the law does not really benefit everyone who is non-binary. In such situation, I critically scrutinize the role of media in portraying transgender representation during the law reform to identify whether the media enables readers to understand accurately the law and promotes the diversity of gender identities or reinforces the traditional norms of binary.

According to iSEE's policy analysis of transgender law, Article 36 in the Civil Code 2005 allowed people who has atypical congenital sex anatomy to reaffirm their sex but they do not really want this right (iSEE, 2014). The result of the law reform in 2015 was the new bill passed with more than 80 percent of the National Assembly voting in favour. The amended Civil Code of 2015 with Article 37 is more progressive than the Civil Code of 2005 because Article 37 introduces the right for legal sex-reassignment surgery in Vietnam and legal gender recognition of transgender persons who have undergone sex-reassignment surgery (Article 37). Before the amendment of the bill, Vietnamese transgender persons had to go abroad to take illegal operations, now they have the right to be operated in Vietnam. By passing the amendment, allow both intersex people and transgender people to undergo sex-reassignment surgery, applying Article 36 and Article 37 respectively. Nevertheless, the law is not really inclusive because it only applies intersex people and transgender persons who desire medical intervention and it excludes a group of people who do not wish to undergo sex-reassignment surgery.

The law reform process began in April 2015 when the Vietnamese government consulted its people on the amendment of the Civil Code. This point in time was also the start of an advocacy campaign in which the media played its part through a series of articles on the law reform, highlighting the rights of Vietnamese transgender persons. The first online articles reporting the proposal that sex-reassignment surgery should be allowed in Vietnam appeared on some websites in April 2015 (see Nam Phuong, 2015; Mai Thao, 2015; Tam Lua, 2015; ĐS&PL, 2015). These coincided with the introduction of the first draft of the articles in the Civil Code. Before this time, I found no articles mentioning the possibility of the law reform for transgender persons. In most articles, the content discussed how the law would regulate transgender persons' rights; there was no information about which individuals or which organizations may have been advocating for the law reform. Some articles showed the role of community-based LGBT rights organizations, Information Connecting and Sharing (ICS), and the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE) when the bill was passed. After the bill was passed, these organizations participated in discussions after the bill was passed to help the transgender community to understand the bill. The last articles on this event during the period covered by this thesis were published in December 2016. After this point in time, some online sites have continued to publish articles which report on discussions for the next proposed laws regarding transgender persons but because of the scope of this thesis, I do not discuss any articles after 2016.

Narratives on the law reform in the five sites

During the two-year period, under the examination in this thesis, there were 64 articles on the law reform across all the five sites. *Motthegioi.vn* had the most articles (24 articles) while the other official site managed by the Government, *Vietnamnet.vn*, had the fewest articles (6 articles). Articles on the three other sites,

Vnexpress.vn, *ThanhNien.vn*, and *Kenh14.vn* were of a similar number (11 to 14 articles each). The disparity in the volume of coverage between *Motthegioi.vn* and the other sites is because *Motthegioi.vn* has a special interest in LGBT issues, expressed through their specific column on LGBT issues. The length of the articles found varies from 1,000 words to 2,000 words. The media outlets covered the news of the process and discussions on the draft of the law. The writers reported the debate among the members of the National Assembly on which persons would be allowed to undergo sex-reassignment. The content of the articles varied depending on the period of the process. Before the bill was approved, writers narrated the debates among the National Assembly members, opinions of people in the community and activities to advocate the law. When the bill was approved, the contents shifted to the happiness and emotion of the LGBT community. Then the media reports moved to concerns around the law and its implementation and discussions on the next steps to draft further specific transgender laws. All the five sites covered news on the process of drafting the law and the voting results.

Contribution to the movement by increasing the visibility of transgender persons in the media

No one could deny that media is a vehicle which can assist social movements and obviously these five online sites partly contributed to the process of this law reform in 2015. The increase in the number of articles on this topic during this period of the law reform enabled the community to access more information about transgender persons. The visibility of transgender persons increased and reached a peak around the debate of the law reform.

A significant feature of the campaign to support the law reform was a large “coming out” campaign in the LGBT community, called for by NGOs. Transgender persons and their friends, parents, relatives and various activists

wrote coming out sentences such as “*I am transgender*”, “*My friend is transgender*” and “*My child is transgender*” on blank paper – and often with the hashtag #*Dung Bo Sot* (“*Leave no one behind*”) – and then displayed a photograph of their sign on social media to advocate for the new Civil Code. Their photos were repeatedly shared and spread via Facebook and other social media with the aim of contributing a positive impact on the process of the amendment of the Civil Code. Some online sites reported this campaign. *Kenh14.vn*, the private e-news site for teenagers, was most active in featuring this event. There were two articles covering this campaign with lots of “coming out” photos of transgender youth, their families and friends. The notable increased media coverage of this event was from October to November 2015, very close to the date that the National Assembly made the decision.

The first article related to the campaign, “I am transgender – the biggest coming out campaign spread across the LGBT community”, reported by Hulk on *Kenh14.vn* was published on 15 October 2015. The article described what the campaign was about and peoples’ responses to the campaign. The articles provided lots of the screenshots of transgender persons and LGBT activists from their personal Facebook pages which showed them posing with a coming out sign in their hands. The commentary on the campaign was written with much sympathy for transgender persons including discussions surrounding discrimination suffered by transgender persons as well as their disadvantages in accessing healthcare services during their transition (Hulk, 2015). This article reported that the campaign had been initiated by an individual of the transgender community and ICS, before spreading through the social network among both LGBT persons and their allies.

After the campaign started to grow, ICS advanced the campaign by turning it into a one-day event of visibility. The event, called The Visibility Day and held on 21

November 2015, saw transgender persons and their allies in twelve cities and provinces of Vietnam gather together with coming out banners and flags, and sharing photos of the event with the hashtags *#ngayhiendien* and/or *#nguoichuyengioi* (*#The Visibility Day* and/or *#Transgender Persons* respectively). This event was also reported on *Kenh14.vn* (HT, 2015). Beside this private e-news site, a special section for the youth of *Vnexpress.net*, the official site run by the State, also included an article about the Coming-out Campaign (Mai Mai, 2015a). However, the article on *Kenh14.vn* reported the event more carefully than the one on *Vnexpress.net* because it provided further information such as discrimination that transgender persons are suffering and why the law should be passed, not just information about the campaign. The reason for this may be that *Kenh14.vn*, as a channel for teenagers, features specific content about LGBT issues. Both the “coming out” campaign and The Visibility Day were initiated by young transgender persons and ICS. It can also be presumed that *Kenh14.vn* has journalists who are from the LGBT community.

The following photos from the article in *Kenh14.vn* on the “coming out” campaign (Hulk, 2015) were interspersed throughout the narration of the campaign. Above each photo the writer introduces who they are. There is a photo of a couple who are parents of a transgender woman. Their sign says: *I am transgender/ My friend is transgender/ My child is transgender # I still love my child # Leave no one behind/ I support transgender persons.*

with and 3 others

23 hrs · Edited ·

#TÔI CHUYỂN GIỚI

Người chuyển giới ở Việt Nam không được pháp luật thừa nhận, không được quyền chuyển đổi giới tính, không được thay đổi họ tên, giới tính trên giấy tờ.

Vì muốn được sống với đúng giới tính của mình, vô số người chuyển giới đang liều mình sử dụng hormone mà không có bác sỹ theo dõi điều trị, và trong số đó, có những người không may mắn đã tử vong. Rất nhiều người chuyển giới đang liều mình phẫu thuật chui ở các bv thẩm mỹ trong nước để rồi sau đó phải chịu h....

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2 hrs · Edited ·

Mong các bạn transgender ở Việt Nam thành công 🍀

#TÔI CHUYỂN GIỚI
#ĐỪNG BỎ SÓT
#CÙNG COME OUT

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Trần An Vi added 5 new photos — 😊 feeling happy with and 3 others at Toà Văn Phòng Liên Hợp Quốc Việt Nam.

5 hrs · Edited ·

#Tôi chuyển giới
Và bên cạnh tôi luôn có những người bạn, luôn có gia đình ủng hộ chúng tôi
#tôi là người chuyển giới
#đừng bỏ sót
#cùng come out



Like Comment Share

You, and 167 others like this.

Trần An Vi added a new photo to TRANS CORE VN's timeline — 😊 feeling wonderful.

28 mins · Vinh Phuc · Edited ·

Chuyển giới thôi chưa đủ
Cộng đồng và những người ủng hộ thôi chưa đủ
Chúng ta cần kêu gọi phụ huynh của chúng ta...những người chuyển giới tham gia vào chiến dịch
Con yêu ba mẹ nhiều nhiều ^^

#Tôi chuyển giới
#Con tôi là người chuyển giới
#Đừng bỏ sót



47 Likes 1 Comment 3 Shares

CôGái Áothun
15 hrs · 🌐

#TÔI CHUYỂN GIỚI



103 Likes 4 Comments

ĐÔNG BÓSỐT
17 hrs · 🌐

#TÔI CHUYỂN GIỚI

Người chuyển giới ở Việt Nam không được pháp luật thừa nhận, không được quyền chuyển đổi giới tính, không được thay đổi họ tên, giới tính trên giấy tờ.

Vì muốn được sống với đúng giới tính của mình, vô số người chuyển giới đang liều mình sử dụng hormone mà không có bác sỹ theo dõi điều trị, và trong số đó, có những người không may mắn đã tử vong. Rất nhiều người chuyển giới đang liều mình phẫu thuật chui ở các bv thẩm mỹ trong nước để rồi sau đó phải chịu hà...

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with [redacted] and 11 others
2 hrs · 🌐

#TÔI CHUYỂN GIỚI

Đừng chờ đợi nữa. Bây giờ hoặc 10 năm nữa. Bạn có muốn chờ đợi thêm 10 năm nữa không?

Nếu bạn biết một người chuyển giới, hãy SHARE, hãy nói với họ về chiến dịch #TÔI CHUYỂN GIỚI. Nếu bạn là một người chuyển giới, đừng chỉ Like nữa, hãy tham gia và rủ bạn bè cùng tham gia:...

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73 Likes 10 Comments 1 Share

Tổ An Huỳnh Nguyễn
3 hrs · 🌐

#TÔI CHUYỂN GIỚI

Người chuyển giới ở Việt Nam không được pháp luật thừa nhận, không được quyền chuyển đổi giới tính, không được thay đổi họ tên, giới tính trên giấy tờ.

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Thảo Minh Huỳnh with **and 8 others**
 56 mins · 🌐

#BANTÔI LÀ NGƯỜI CHUYỂN GIỚI

Tôi chưa bao giờ tự hào như lúc này. Rằng tôi có rất nhiều bạn bè là những người chuyển giới, họ đã sống bên cạnh, chia sẻ và giúp đỡ tôi rất nhiều trong nhiều việc. Họ tử tế và gần gũi, sống chân thành và tài năng. Họ có những người cô đơn và những người đang hạnh phúc với cặp đôi của mình. Những người đầy kinh nghiệm và những người chỉ mới bước vào đời.

Và họ đang cần tôi chung tay trong chiến dịch **#ĐỪNG BỎ SÓT #TÔI CHUYỂN GIỚI** một chiến dịch t... See More



47 Likes 1 Comment 1 Share

Trần Anh
 3 hrs · 🌐

#TÔI CHUYỂN GIỚI #CÙNG COME OUT #ĐỪNG BỎ SÓT

Người chuyển giới ở Việt Nam không được pháp luật thừa nhận, không được quyền chuyển đổi giới tính, không được thay đổi họ tên, giới tính trên giấy tờ.

Vì muốn được sống với đúng giới tính của mình, vô số người chuyển giới đang liều mình sử dụng hormone mà không có bác sỹ theo dõi điều trị, và trong số đó, có những người không may mắn đã tử vong. Rất nhiều người chuyển giới đang liều mình phẫu thuật chui ở các bv thẩm mỹ trong n... Continue Reading



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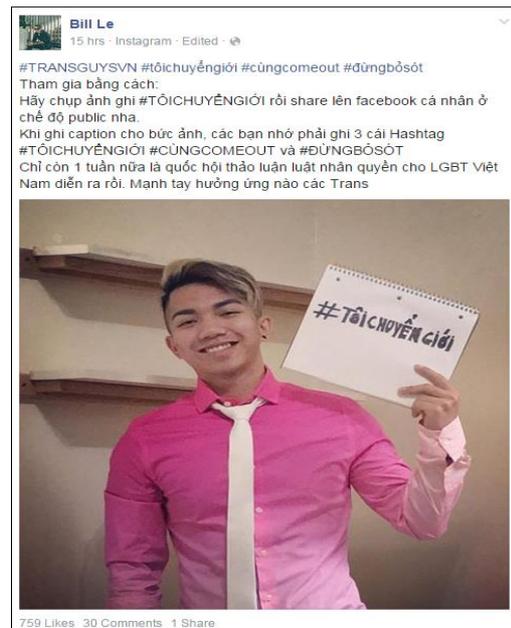
feeling happy with **and 2 others** at
 16 hrs · Edited · 🌐

Xung quanh mình rất nhiều người chuyển giới trong đó có cả những ng thân yếu của mình... Họ vẫn là con người và có quyền được bình đẳng như chúng ta...

#tolunghonguoichuyengioi #toyeucacban



45 Likes 3 Comments



“Coming out” Campaign of Vietnamese Transgender Persons

(Hulk, 2015)

The following photos appeared in an article in *Kenh14.vn* on The Visibility Day. The article reported the event and showed photos from the twelve cities and provinces in Vietnam where the youth gathered together to advocate for the law. These young people were pictured holding a round circle symbolizing the button that the members of the National Assembly would press to pass the bill to legalize transgender rights. This button image, in the colours of international transgender flag, was initiated by ICS and TRANS CORE, a group of transgender persons. They invited everyone to use this symbol as an avatar photo on their Facebook pages to spread the message *“Leave no one behind”*. Some of them used English to express their statement to draw the attention of foreigners. These photos express an exciting atmosphere that participants created to increase the visibility of transgender persons.







The Visibility Day
(HT, 2015)

‘Real names’

As well as discussing the law reform and the campaigning, the media covered stories of individual transgender persons in the community. This coverage included stories told in the sessions of the National Assembly and in interviews around the time of the law being passed. There were about five transgender persons/activists whose stories appeared in online media. They became familiar faces in the media by sharing their stories, their thoughts and their feelings. One progressive feature seen clearly in these articles was that writers used more terminologies than pronouns. By using “Female-to-Male” or “Male-to-Female” or “Transgender Person” when referring to someone, writers avoided misusing pronouns as seen in the articles on celebrities discussed in the previous chapter.

However, regarding transgender names, a common phenomenon of revealing their birth-names appeared.

For example, in *Vnexpress.net* an article published on the day after the bill was passed included the following:

Tri Phong, whose real name is Nguyen Thi Truc Phuong, was born in 1991... Born as a woman, but since the age of 5, the girl recognized the gender identity as a man... At 18 years of age, Phong came out as a female-to-male person... (Tran, 2015).

An Vi (whose real name is Tran Anh Vu), a male-to-female person, said she recognized her gender identity does not match with her sex since she was in grade one... (Tran, 2015).

Another article on *Thanhnienvn* on the day when the bill was passed:

Nguyen Thien Tri Phong (whose name in the birth certificate is Nguyen Thi Truc Phuong, 24 years old) used hormones for 2 years and said: "I had mixed feelings when I knew the news" (Vu, 2015).

While Ms Nguyen Huynh To An, whose nickname is Jessica (name in the birth certificate is Nguyen Huu Toan, 28 years old) and underwent sex-reassignment two years ago, shared: "Right after the National Assembly passed the law, I cried and called my mom..." (Vu, 2015).

On *Motthegioi.vn* the following passage appeared in an article published during the debate on the bill. The writer not only mentioned the birth-name of the transgender person but states it first and puts the preferred name in the brackets,

thus suggesting the birth-name to be more important and authentic than the name that the transgender person wishes to be called.

In the conference, Nguyen Huu Toan (Jessica, a transgender person) burst into tears: “My mom did not allow me to go to Thailand to have surgery. But then she understood and today she is also here to share this experience with me. My friends, 10 of them died in my hands, because they had health problems after undergoing surgery, but no domestic clinics dare to treat them. We still work, proving ourselves and achieving success... We are not respected, being called “be de”⁶...” (PLTP, 2015).

This passage is contradictory, quoting Jessica at length on the oppression of transgender persons and yes, at the same time, disrespecting her by delegitimizing her name.

In articles relating to organizations working for the rights of the LGBT community, writers seem to be more sensitive. They mention transgender persons’ chosen names without revealing their birth names. For instance, on *Thanhnienvn* Thu Hang (2015) wrote about three transgender persons including both male-to-female and female-to-male persons, from both majority and minority ethnic groups. The writer quoted their expressions of both happiness and worry because the law is not clear about transgender persons who do not wish to change their body and whether they can be legally recognized. The writer also interviewed two experts from iSEE on their opinions of the limitations of the law. Another article on the activities of ICS raised questions on the status of persons who use only hormone therapy. This article also reported the opinions of some transgender persons who actively participated in LGBT activities without

⁶ “Pe de” is a stigmatizing word to despise LGBT people

revealing their birth names (Nhu Lich, 2015). Questioning the rights of Vietnamese transgender persons when the law was passed, an article on *Vnexpress.net* interviewed an expert from iSEE, quoting the words of a transgender activist without providing his former name.

Huynh Tri Vien, one of female-to-male person (transgender male), who is leading in LGBT movement in Ho Chi Minh city said: “A new life for me and other transgender persons starts now. My friends, transgender persons who have not come out because of severe discrimination, will have an opportunity to step out for the first time to be themselves...” (Mai Mai, 2015b).

In short, although writers in the law reform seem to be more sensitive than those who represent trans celebrities, they still carelessly used transgender persons’ birth names. I assume that most of their using terms or reference to transgender persons were based on their own experience rather than an official set of protocols for inclusive language in the media like the Glossary of Terms introduced by GLAAD⁷. Moreover, Vietnam does not have such media reference guideline that leads to defamatory pieces of transgender persons in the media.

The “wrong body” and medical discourse

The “wrong body” is a common discourse for transgender representations in the media, articulated by journalists and by transgender persons themselves. This is evident in the chapter on celebrities; it is also found in media coverage of the law reform. The transgender representatives appearing in this chapter are transgender activists. The media did not focus much on one specific transgender representative in the way it did with celebrities. Because of the purpose of the

⁷ GLAAD is the abbreviation for Gay Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, a dynamic media force. GLAAD introduces a Glossary of Terms, including Media Reference Guide – Transgender for media writers: <https://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>

coverage of the law reform, writers tried to bring as many stories about transgender representatives to the media as possible. These stories uplift the voices of transgender persons in the community to help society learn more about transgender persons' lives and understand how legal recognition is important for them. Thus, one article may include short accounts or short quotations of two or three representatives from the transgender community. When being asked about their thoughts and feelings, many transgender persons shared their feelings of being in the "wrong body". This aligns with Prosser's argument that the "wrong body" discourse has become the dominant script of transgender subjectivity because it most adequately speaks to the ways in which transgender people experience their own identities, through the very real feelings of or - "belief in an immanent gender"- (Prosser, 1988, p.17). However, repeatedly reiterating this dominant script from quotations of transgender persons then strengthens the "wrong body" discourse. The following two passages, extracted from an article by Tran (2015) on *Vnexpress.net*. Tran (2015) provided two cases of transgender persons wanting to have transition surgery.

Wishing to change from inside out to become a real man one and a half years ago, Phong started using hormones... On 24 November, the National Assembly passed the bill, Phong was happy and planned to go to hospital to have surgery, such as a hysterectomy and continuing hormone therapy to become a real man. (Tran, 2015).

An Vi (whose birth name is Tran Anh Vu), a male-to-female person, said she recognized her gender identity has not matched her sex since she was in grade one. In order to be her expected gender identity, Vi always behaves like a woman when walking, speaking and in her dress. At the age of 21, she invested in cosmetic surgery and has been taking medicine such as hormone therapy to become more feminine...An Vi said she wishes to continue undergoing sex-reassignment surgery to complete the

transition... “My soul is really a woman. All I have done is to be recognized as a beautiful woman by everyone”, as told by An Vi.” (Tran, 2015).

In Phong’s story, the writer used the word “real” to describe what Phong will become if he continues medical intervention. This narrative implies that a “real” man requires hormone therapy or surgery, and ultimately enables medical discourse to be powerful in determining transgender identities. This traditional way of understanding gender holds the idea that a man necessarily has a male-sexed body.

While the script of “wrong body” and medical discourse is popular in the media, whether these discourses are articulated by transgender persons themselves or by journalists, its popularity consolidates the perception that a transgender person is someone who is not satisfied with their body and will undergo sex-reassignment surgery.

Questioning the bill

After the new Civil Code passed, there were calls for the Vietnamese government to draft specific transgender laws which clearly state the provisions for the regulation of sex-reassignment surgery and other such related laws. The media has been critical and active in raising questions about the bill. All five sites published articles which clarified the new bill while also raising questions about cases in which transgender persons do not wish to undergo sex-reassignment surgery. The media cooperated with iSEE and ICS to offer information based on these organizations’ documents and information sharing sessions with transgender persons. These articles included “Ten things about legal recognition of transgender persons in Vietnam” (Nguyen, 2015) on *Vietnamnet.vn*; “Seven

concerns of Vietnamese transgender persons when the new bill was passed” (MinT, 2015a) on *Vnexpress.net*; and “With hormone therapy only, will transgender persons still be legally recognized?” (Anonymous 1, 2015) on *Thanhkien.vn*. The article on *Thanhkien.vn* included the results of a survey conducted by iSEE about the demands of transgender persons which showed that 86% of persons wish to change their names without undergoing surgery. *Vietnamnet.vn* and *Vnexpress.vn* both included articles based on legal consultation which answer inquiries about identity cards or the rights of transgender persons after the law was approved (see Anonymous 2, 2015; Pham, 2016). Particularly, the article “What transgender persons are allowed to do now the bill has been passed” (Mai Mai, 2015b) on *Vnexpress.vn*, in an effort to have iSEE specialist’s opinion, helps readers to understand clearly that the new bill applies both intersex people (Article 36) and transgender persons (Article 37), however it does not apply to people who want to change personal legal document without medical intervention. It also points out the progressive trend in the world that people can change their legal document no matter they wish to surgery or not (Mai Mai, 2015b).

In addition, among those articles published after the bill, there were some interesting and crucial articles which investigated the status of transgender persons who do not fall within the scope of the law. These articles raise questions about the case of Tu Lo Kho, a transgender person who does not wish to undergo sex-reassignment surgery. *Vnexpress.net* had an article titled “Tu Lo Kho finds no benefits when Vietnam allows sex-reassignment surgery” (MinT, 2015b). In this article, Tu Lo Kho raises the problem that the law only covers persons who undergo sex-reassignment surgery, thus many persons like him who do not have the intention to have an operation are excluded. Under the new law, he will never be legally recognized and able to register his new gender. Another article on *Kenh14.vn* also highlighted Tu Lo Kho’s issue under the title “Those not

undergoing sex-reassignment surgery will not benefit from legal recognition” (Thu Huong, 2015). One more important point is that the law is not clear enough. Although Article 37 of the new Civil Code allows sex-reassignment surgery in Vietnam, that seems to be a progression, Article 36 of the law still limits its objects who are intersex. Whether the law could open for the persons whose bodies are normal is still a question. However, this question has not been raised in the media. While readers should be explained clearly this point, the debate was only around whether transgender persons are legally recognized if they do not undergo sex-reassignment surgery. The ways that media narrated could mislead that transgender persons who have normal bodies could access surgery.

Thanhnie.vn published an interview with a specialist, the Deputy of The Department of Civil and Economic Laws Nguyen Hong Hai, on other issues after the law was passed to help policy-makers consider all aspects of the law carefully when drafting the next stages of specific transgender law (Thai Son, 2015). This article was also reposted on *Motthegioi.vn*. These listed articles were published right after the bill was passed on 24 December 2015. There were fewer articles on this issue in 2016. Nearly one year after the law was passed in 2015, *Motthegioi.vn* published an article titled “Only legally recognized if injecting hormones for 5 years?” (Ngan Nga, 2016) which reported a workshop held by the Ministry of Health and ICS with the participation of transgender persons and Lam Khanh Chi, a transgender celebrity mentioned in the previous chapter. The article reported the opinions of participants which challenged the proposal that transgender persons must use hormones for 5 years and undergo transition because not all of them wish to do so or have the finances to do so. This series of articles is crucial because it raised the voices of transgender persons and their demands. However, the articles that point to the limits of the new law, like the case of Tu Lo Kho, are rare while the narratives of persons who wish to take surgery to fix their “wrong body” are most prevalent.

In conclusion, it could be said that the representations of transgender people and issues during the law reform period was progressive. The five sites discussed the same concerns about the law reform and other issues related to the law, such as changing transgender persons' papers and their rights and obligations following the law reform. The representations of the law reform demonstrate that Vietnamese online media was close to the event, showing concern about a significant issue related to human rights and contributing to the advocacy around the law reform, making clarification of target groups that the law applies to and then questioning the related problems afterwards. This active coverage advanced the visibility of transgender persons. However, the unnecessary provision of the birth-names of transgender persons was unfortunate. Online media writers do not always understand the protocols. The articles discussed here show that contact with NGOs is probably a factor that advanced the positive visibility of transgender people during the law reform. To ensure more sensitive articles, the media organizations and their writers need more training on how to represent transgender persons respectfully. Furthermore, while some articles questioned the law, and its exclusion of transgender people who do not want, or cannot access surgery, many more unquestioningly narrated the "wrong body" and medical discourse. Although article 37 of the Civil Code, which allows a person to undergo sex-reassignment, is a step forward in advancing the rights of transgender persons, not all transgender persons are included because of the condition of required medical intervention. The media raised questions on this exclusion, however, only one transgender person represented this issue across the five sites; and no articles on whether the law could open to persons whose bodies are normal. It would be better if there were more transgender representatives who raise their voices for the rights of transgender cases in which no sex-reassignment surgery has been had. The media can do more than what has so far been done to support the next step of drafting specific laws for transgender persons to ensure

that all transgender persons are included, whether they undergo sex-reassignment surgery or not.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored the way that transgender persons are depicted in five Vietnamese online sites, including both state-controlled and private sites. The visibility of transgender persons is examined according to theme, including the representations of transgender celebrities, the prominent topic on transgenderism in the media, and the representations of transgender persons through the law reform. The results reveal that there are both similarities and differences in representing transgender persons in two themes. The commonality is the “wrong body” discourse which is articulated by both writers and transgender persons themselves to claim for their identities. Mis-using pronouns and revealing birth-names was seen in many articles. Although the narratives on transgender persons in Vietnamese online media considered here do not use direct offensive words towards transgender persons, the ways they represented transgender persons still showed a degree of disrespect. In its representation of celebrities, the media still portrays transgender persons in sensational ways which highlight their transgender profile to create voyeuristic details, serving their assumed cisgender readers. In the coverage of law reform, transgender persons seemed to be represented with more sympathy.

Clearly, the nature and purpose of two sets of representation are different. The narratives on transgender celebrities are for entertainment while the stories of the law reform and the activist’s campaigns are news reports of politics and advocacy for the rights of transgender persons. It is undeniable that the online media contributed to the visibility of the campaign for law reform which advanced the rights of transgender persons. However, the media focused on cases of transgender persons who wish to undergo sex-reassignment surgery. It can thus be argued that when representing transgender persons, Vietnamese online media support the sex/gender binary, encouraging persons to identify with one of the

only two genders options available. These representations also exclude those who do not conform to conventional norms of gender; the online media examined here thus produces transnormativity. In comparison with the international media, the representations of transgender persons, particularly the representations of transgender celebrities in Vietnam online media fit in the framework of the representations of transgender celebrities in the world at some aspects, such as the adherence to the heteronormativity and beauty standard, employing the “wrong body” discourse, and mistaking pronouns. Except for these common limitations, Vietnam online media contributes to the inclusion of gender diversity through questioning the right of persons who have “normal” bodies and do not wish to undergo sex-reassignment through the coverage of the law reform despite this representation still not appearing popularly in the media.

To have better representations of transgender persons in Vietnamese media, this thesis concludes with some recommendations. Firstly, there should be more cooperation among NGOs and journalists to promote progressive images of transgender persons. Training on sex/gender diversity should be held with the participation of journalists, media companies and media agencies. To advocate for the next step of the specific law on transgender persons, transgender persons who do not wish to undergo sex-reassignment should be highlighted more often in the media to challenge the conventional concept of transgender persons. More importantly, the media needs to raise voice of persons whose bodies are ‘normal’ as a group of transgender persons should be included.

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