



**Navigating Identities:**

**Investigating the Identity Construction of**

**Vietnamese Youth in the Diaspora**

MS Thesis

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

On June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023, a video featuring two men singing and dancing fervently at a wedding party in Northern Vietnam was posted on the Instagram account of @phodaculture or Phở Da Culture (Phở Da Culture, 2023). Next to the “crazy” partying scene of the two men, a middle-aged woman wearing Áo dài, the traditional Vietnamese clothes, was sitting and acting indifferently to the scene. It seems that to her this is just daily life. Under the post was the caption: “When the Hennessy hits right as the Karaoke session starts..... Tag your friend who gets like this when the liquor hits >.< \*arrow downward\*”. After being posted, this video immediately attracted massive reactions and responses from Instagram users: 17,966,108 views, 354,290 likes, and more than 14,700 comments in many languages. According to the account owner, this video began Phở Da Culture, an online Vietnamese culture-related community. Since then, the online community Phở Da Culture has worked diligently to create, share, and remix content from other users and has been growing to be one of the most popular Vietnamese culture communities on the Internet with more than 366,000 followers only on an Instagram account (Phở Da Culture has its YouTube and TikTok version). Similarly to the post that was just depicted, Phở Da Culture had much content about the drinking and partying culture of Vietnamese people. In big family gatherings, nail salons, wedding parties, or any random place, Vietnamese people can always sing karaoke, dance, drink, and party. Besides this fun spirit, the online community mentioned its commission in one of the pre-launch posts: “Don’t matter if you’re full Vietnamese or half, 3SC represents you.” (3SC is the former name of the community). This inclusive mindset has also been repeated in many comments, captions, and posts of the community. Similarly to Phở Da Culture, there have been several emerging online communities created by and for the younger generations of the Vietnamese diaspora on social media, mostly on Instagram and TikTok. Despite their “success” in connecting and creating a large community

of Vietnamese youngsters worldwide, these communities also evoke several questions about the way they can connect a group of people from diverse backgrounds and about the significance of these online communities in constructing a novel young Vietnamese identity. Looking into these communities, it can be concluded that they are created by and for the 1.5, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and later generations of Vietnamese immigrants. The common characteristics of these people are that their experiences living in Vietnam are limited. Vietnam to them might be only known from the stories of their parents, grandparents, and local communities. Their first language might not even be Vietnamese, and their identities are intertwined with other local and global identities. In other words, members of these online communities are a group of people with super diverse backgrounds. Moreover, unlike the older generation groups, anti-communism/pro-communism ideologies and preserving cultural identities (Le, 2015) are not decisive factors of their Vietnamese identities, yet a Vietnamese identity is visibly essential in their online interactions. In particular, when it comes to political and regional divisions or North/South Vietnamese identities, these youngsters are aware of the importance of cultural roots and the pride of their countries. For example, Phở Da Culture and its American Vietnamese members also use the community to celebrate or remind each other of various national holidays, take pride in the distinctions of Southern Vietnamese accents, or share information about academic, artistic, and athletic achievements by Vietnamese diaspora members.

Meanwhile, since these public online communities are not exclusive to members of the Vietnamese diaspora community of any region, other groups of Vietnamese can also access, and interact with the content. On the one hand, these online communities (un)expectedly become the spaces where young Vietnamese people worldwide share their cultural experiences, collectively feel nostalgic about a historical event, or share stories of practicing a tradition. On the other hand, these places are also where people from different backgrounds

learn about the hardships and traumas of other groups and where the conflicts of North and South divisions continue to take place in various forms. In other words, the collisions between the two groups (Vietnamese refugees and Vietnamese people from Vietnam) will inevitably take place. It seems that for the younger generations, this is the first time, thanks to social media, they can break through the North-South “border” and the information gatekeeping of the older generations to communicate with people from the other side. I would argue that this is a necessary step for the healing and reuniting process both sides have discussed in the last several decades.

Based on these reasons, I would like to investigate the new cultural identities of Vietnamese youngsters in online diasporic communities. Born in the digitalization and globalization era, Vietnamese youngsters, immigrants or non-immigrants, rely on social media platforms to express their identities and showcase their cultural practices and traditions. From cooking tutorials, and teaching the Vietnamese alphabet through rap songs to using memes to satirically address stereotypes, the younger groups of the diaspora have numerous creative methods to show pride in their cultures and also to address sensitive and challenging topics. Online communities such as @phodaculture were created as collective spaces for representing online content related to Vietnamese culture and sharing them with a group of audience who identify with Phở Da Culture or Vietnamese online culture. In that process, the online community has built and maintained a novel Vietnamese diasporic ethnic, cultural, and national identity on social media. This research project will then examine how @phodaculture represents novel Vietnamese identities on social media. Especially, within the context of the Vietnamese diaspora, the study would like to see if the online identity of young Vietnamese immigrants could incite universal Vietnamese experiences, which has been a challenge for a diverse group such as the Vietnamese diaspora. To understand the significance of the online community on young Vietnamese immigrants, the study will also investigate the

interpretations and experiences of a group of young Vietnamese immigrants in the specific location of the Netherlands.

## Objectives and Research Questions

The transnational connections of the younger generation of the Vietnamese diaspora have rarely caught the attention of academic scholars. Research on this social group has always focused on investigating the struggles of living in “two worlds”: Vietnamese at home and another identity at school (Pham & Kraus, 2024; Zhou & Bankston, 2000); or else, it would be their reasons, conditions, and challenges when returning to Vietnam to settle down despite the long-time disconnections (Koh, 2015). Before social media, transnational media was one of the major forms of exchanging information between Vietnam and the young generations of the Vietnamese diaspora. Research has shown that the media from the homeland exists in the lives of the second generation of Vietnamese immigrants in the Czech Republic (Nguyen, 2021). Especially, since they mostly consumed Vietnamese TV during their time with their parents, the Vietnamese transnational media plays the role of symbolic “home” building. However, once they moved out of their parents’ houses, they did not actively look for these media since they did not develop a sense of belonging with the Vietnamese transnational media. For other communities of the Vietnamese diaspora, there have been several investigations on the transnational influence of pop culture from the Vietnamese American community (Lieu, 2011; Nguyen & Cunningham, 1999). However, there has not been any research directly investigating the significant influence of these different forms of transnational media in shaping the ethnic and diasporic identities of the younger groups.

In the last several decades, the Vietnamese diaspora witnessed the rise of a new group of permanent and contemporary young immigrants who moved to new countries for work and study. Different from the first emigrating groups moving across the world during the 70s and 80s, these young immigrants did not suffer from memories of displacement and difficulties of

settlement but enjoyed “high mobility” thanks to advanced technologies in transportation, communication, and economics (Tran, 2017). Due to their strong social networks and attachment to Vietnam, their transnationalism with the homeland is intense and diverse in many aspects. Their transnational connections do not stop at consuming transnational media but also include daily chatting, calling, and texting their family and friends. Some of them might even keep professional networks with companies and different agencies in Vietnam.

To these two groups of youngsters of the Vietnamese diaspora (the later generations of the diaspora and the group of recent first-generation migrants), social media is replacing the mass media in terms of facilitating transnational connections and cultural identity development.

Several research has concluded that social media can assist young people in developing cultural identities that go beyond their racial/ethnic and national cultures. (McKenzie, 2022).

Exposing to non-local media and social media, young people could identify themselves with different forms of cultures that are not close to their ethnic/racial cultures. Similarly, for the young immigrants of the Vietnamese diaspora, Phở Da Culture, and other online communities are constructing, perhaps for the first time, a “universal” Vietnamese cultural identity across national borders and specific local regions. However, to the young migrants of the Vietnamese diaspora, the cultural identity created by the online diaspora communities not only facilitates the connection needs, but they might also formulate and strengthen new ethnic identities to which they identify and feel belong. It is also important to note here that due to the overlapping of cultural identity formulated in the Phở Da Culture and the Vietnamese ethnic identity, in this study, the two concepts of “cultural identity” and “ethnic identity” will be used interchangeably to refer to one cultural identity constructed via interactions of the online community.

Despite their objectives and efforts to create a community of unity and independent of political ideologies (which have divided the Vietnamese diasporic experiences), I would

argue that there are several challenges for the online community. Due to the diversity of the Vietnamese diaspora, they must be aware of the differences and, at the same time, represent commonality among their members. These challenges trigger the question of whether this phenomenon is creating a significant impact in representing and formulating the Vietnamese identities while reflecting the distinct life experiences of members of the Vietnamese diaspora. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the roles of online communities in shaping novel young Vietnamese identities. The main research question is:

*What are the roles of Vietnamese ethnic online communities in defining the cultural identity of youngsters of the Vietnamese diaspora?*

This main research question focuses on the roles and significance of this phenomenon in defining the ethnic (and cultural) identity of the young members of the Vietnamese diaspora. However, to answer this question, I would argue that we need to explore the “methods” that they employ to construct or associate with Vietnamese culture. Therefore, the first sub-question is:

*What methods were used to construct the Vietnamese identities in online Vietnamese ethnic communities?*

The methods here refer to a consistent way of representing Vietnamese identities, which might include evoking the same sentiments, constantly employing similar objects and mindsets, or promoting new culture/identities. In other words, it is the strategic and conscious way of constructing the Vietnamese identity through online interactions. Related to the methods of constructing the Vietnamese identities is the kind of Vietnamese identity being represented. Research has shown that the Vietnamese young generation has been suppressed by the first-generation ideology (Zhou & Bankston, 2000), and the cultural identity of the later generation is usually drowned in the anti-communism ideology or the transnational connections of the first generation. This might be our first time to acknowledge a kind of



Vietnamese identity that the younger generation would like to present and use to connect.

Therefore, in this study, I would like to examine the kinds of identities that they aim to represent and why they chose to represent them. Therefore, the second sub-question is:

*What are the Vietnamese identities presented in online Vietnamese ethnic communities? And why are they chosen as the representative Vietnamese identities?*

Last but not least, it is important to see the reactions and interpretations of members of the younger generation of the Vietnamese diaspora, who directly contribute to and are directly influenced by these online communities. The third and last sub-question, then, is:

*What are the interpretations and perceptions of young members of the Vietnamese diaspora when consuming content and information from online Vietnamese ethnic communities?*

Here, it is important to remember that these online communities are still controlled and managed by a small group of people based in the US. Despite their effort to represent a unified Vietnamese identity that is independent of political ideology, social class, and cultural background, the content is still influenced by the culture of the Vietnamese American community. Therefore, the content might only reflect a Vietnamese American ideology instead of unified and universal Vietnamese experiences as they claimed. Within that context, it is even more important to investigate how young Vietnamese immigrants from other regions perceive and understand the cultural identities represented in this content. The group of Vietnamese people living in the Netherlands was chosen based on the convenience of the study. Due to the huge difference in experiences between the Vietnamese in the US and Europe (Steinman, 2021), this is an interesting and meaningful selection to see the discrepancy in terms of identity perception between someone from the US and someone from Europe.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical Frameworks

### 2.1 The diverse experiences of the young immigrants of the Vietnamese diaspora

Although Vietnamese emigration started long before, 1975 marked the start of several massive waves of immigration from Vietnam. Since then, the Vietnamese diaspora communities have quickly grown in almost all regions, especially in the US, Australia, Russia, and Europe. In places with an established community such as the US, the group of 1.5 and second generations is increasing exponentially, accounting for a large part of the population. In 2015, 689,000 second-generation Vietnamese in the United States comprised 38.5% of the Vietnamese population. Despite the fast growth of this group in Vietnamese diaspora communities, research about the younger generations plays a minor role than the impact of anti-communism ideology in the diasporic lives or the relationships between the diaspora communities (mostly the first generation) and the former homeland. However, as the first generation of the Vietnamese diaspora is aging, studies about the later generations are gaining more attention. Before investigating the cultural representations of online communities, it is important to know several distinguished characteristics of the young group of the Vietnamese diaspora. Since this group is not a homogenous social group but comprises different sub-groups of migrants, I will focus on highlighting the findings of previous studies on their diverse migrating experiences and their relationships with the former homeland (or the former homeland of their parents or grandparents), host countries as well as the diaspora communities in their regions.

Similarly to the experiences of other immigrant groups, young Vietnamese migrants oftentimes find themselves in the conflict of balancing between diasporic and mainstream social identities, which is usually one of the major factors affecting the ethnic-cultural

identification process and the comprehension of their cultural heritage. These conflicts are usually consequences of factors such as the migrating contexts of their family, the building and development of the local Vietnamese communities, and the socio-political situations of the new countries (Freidingerová & Nováková, 2021; Pham & Kraus, 2024; Zhou & Bankston, 2000). However, in different countries, there are distinctive factors influencing the struggles of Vietnamese immigrant kids.

When investigating the experiences of the second generation of the Vietnamese American diaspora, Zhou and Bankston (2000) argued family and community structures as the two main factors affecting the lives of Vietnamese younger generations in the US. First, due to the traumatic memories of fleeing and resettling in a new country, Vietnamese parents put the goal of achieving material success as their ultimate objective and passed this drive on to their children. For Vietnamese children, the vague memories of life in Vietnam, of a journey fleeing their ancestral land, or of life in refugee camps could not help them comprehend the parental pressures. Some of them dismiss the memories since they feel forced to carry the traumas and ideologies of older generations, which they could not comprehend or feel burdened to carry on. Even when some others live up to the expectations of their parents, they still have to deal with the huge burden of family history. Second, Zhou & Bankston (2000) argued that the Vietnamese community can be either advantageous or disadvantageous to the future of immigrant kids. When landing in the US, the Vietnamese communities were rebuilt and reconstructed, and an ethnic identity revolving around the ideology of anti-communism, the memories of exile, and the uncertain transition in an alien world was created and strengthened. This community reinforced a pressure for conformity and social controls on younger generations, which became the measurement to decide who is the “good kid” and who is the “bad kid”. For the “good kids”, the Vietnamese communities in America provide them the “social capital”, which benefits their cultural capital, academic success, successful

integration, fluency in both Vietnamese and English and so on. On the contrary, due to ethnic ties and community conformity, any kid who could not live up to the expectations or show unconventional, rebellious attitudes might be excluded or be an outsider in the community. That consequently pushes them into committing crimes and juvenile delinquency (Lam, 2015; Zhou & Bankston, 2000).

In the Czech Republic, where there is also a large group of Vietnamese people, the immigrant experience of the young immigrants is usually described as opposite from the group of Vietnamese American youngsters. Freidingerová & Nováková (2021) pointed out that the younger Vietnamese generations in the Czech Republic encountered more struggles in understanding their Vietnamese and Czech identities in comparison with their North American counterparts. Most of them went through a phase of denying or not being aware of their Vietnamese identity, and only later understanding and appreciating it. This was created due to the lack of Vietnamese community in their regions, the long working hours of their parents, and their attachment to their Czech nannies. Their explorations and appreciation for the Vietnamese culture only took place later in their life. Within this context, the second-generation Vietnamese Czech people initiated more SGAs (second-generation associations) which focused on helping young Vietnamese “counter the social and normative pressures coming from Czech society and the Vietnamese community”. These associations not only promote intragroup connections but also facilitate civic engagements, helping integration, appreciation for Vietnamese cultural heritage and identity, and intergenerational communications (Freidingerová & Nováková, 2021).

Last but not least, besides the groups of younger generations of the Vietnamese diaspora, there is another group of Vietnamese recent immigrants. This last group of young immigrants has added an “interesting dynamic” to the interactions among sub-groups within the diaspora communities. They are international students and skilled migrants who had access to media,

environments, and opportunities from outside the country from a young age. Different from the previous immigrant/refugee groups, they do not have to go through a tragic phase of exile and settling. Their middle-class backgrounds in the homeland allow them to enjoy the status of “global citizen” and the transnational mobility between the two countries. However, research also pointed out that when this new group of migrants and the established diaspora groups encountered, it created certain tensions and competition (Baldassar et al., 2017; Tran, 2017). Due to their knowledge of Vietnamese culture and their hybrid global identities, the group of newly arrived immigrants tends to be perceived as superior regarding cultural capital and global mobility (Tran, 2017). Their supposed alignment with the Vietnamese regime is also seen as culturally distant from some established Vietnamese communities in the US, Canada, or Australia. Lastly, they are also seen as a stress or even a threat to the local community resources (Baldassar et al., 2017).

Based on previous research into these groups of young immigrants, we can conclude that the young members of the Vietnamese diaspora have diverse immigrant experiences and also diverse sociocultural (and political) identities. Despite their differences in terms of migrating experiences, social classes, knowledge about the homeland, and opportunities for transnational connections, these groups of people are interacting and shaping a new phase of the Vietnamese diaspora. Different from the older generations, their political ideologies are not a decisive factor in defining the cultural identities of these groups, and therefore, they might be open to new knowledge and ideologies. In the era of transnationalism and digital technology, they also have more opportunities to explore their heritage culture as well as to talk and communicate across the differences. However, forming a shared identity for these groups of people is still challenging and even unimaginable.

Based on the previous findings about the characteristics of these groups of young migrants in different regions, the study aims to understand if a universal Vietnamese immigrant is

feasible and, if so, what influences this construction. Moreover, although online communities take place in a virtual non-national-border space, it is argued that online representation must still be influenced by or represent certain features of the regional and local communities. Therefore, the studies of these groups in specific localities would be extremely useful in making sense of the diasporic experiences represented in the online representations and interactions. Besides that, the study might also add new knowledge about the differences between online and offline diasporic communities.

## 2.2 Living in diaspora communities and the need for belonging

A great number of research showed that people have a fundamental need for belonging (Allen et al., 2021; Bell, 1999). As the physical safety and well-being of humans are connected with the quality of human relationships and the characteristics of the surrounding world (Thich, 2017, as cited in Allen et al., 2021), the state of belonging gives people ease of mind and prevents stress, psychological disorders, and physical deficits (Cacioppo et al., 2015). In the field of social psychology, scholars also suggested the importance of belonging for the mental health of immigrants (Simich et al., 2009). Therefore, research on the sociocultural belonging of immigrants and different stages of adaptation was suggested to understand how immigrants perceive and cope with mental well-being (Simich et al., 2009). All in all, we conclude that humans need and instinctively look for social safety, connection, and belonging (Slavich, 2020). So what is belonging? Although there are many definitions of belonging, I would argue that belonging is an affective state of humans where they define their relationship with people, objects, and the environment around them. However, it goes beyond “being” in the state by adding an affective dimension of longing (Elspeth Probyn, 1996, as cited in Bell, 1999). Belonging is not only associated with where one is born, and raised, or an identity that was predetermined, but it is an active process of finding, building, constructing, and making sense of the “self”.

In the complexities of modern society, people constantly struggle to have a sense of belonging (Anderson & Thayer, 2018). Especially within minority groups such as groups of migrants, refugees, and people from isolated areas, the constant need for belonging is common, and it is an issue on a collective and individual level. Research has concluded that due to their marginal status in both homeland and host country, people from diaspora communities tend to struggle to build a sense of belonging (Simich et al., 2009) and diasporic connections became essential to the lives of the diasporic members. Diaspora commonly refers to different kinds of migrant groups who have left their homeland but continue to share a religious, ethnonational, or national identity (Quayson & Daswani, 2013). The struggle of feeling belonging is mostly created by the complexities of social issues such as integration, racialism, traumatic memories of displacement, and resettlement that diasporic individuals usually experience in both homeland and host society. Research on different migrant groups has shown that formulating distinguished ethnic identities or hybrid identities is one of the common methods that migrant groups use to cope with marginalization in both societies (Tsuda, 2013).

Ethnic identity is defined as a multidimensional construct that concerns attitudes, feelings and perceptions of group membership, self-image, ethnic affiliation, and also ingroup and intergroup attitudes (Ting-Toomey et al., 2000). Following the literature review of Phinney (1991), the concept of ethnic identity salience is useful in measuring the degree of ethnic identity on a continuum from strong to weak. Strong ethnic identity salience refers to the self-identification of “group members, evaluating ethnic group positively, preferring or are comfortable with their group membership, being interested in, knowledgeable about, and committed to the group, and are involved in ethnic practices”, and vice versa. According to Ting-Toomey et al. (2000), when immigrant kids cannot identify strongly with both their ethnic group and mainstream society, they are practicing *marginalization*, one of the four

ethnic identity salience categories. The result of this marginalization could be the formulation of multiple forms of *hybrid identities*, which emphasize the fluid, multiple, and contextual practices of identification and the agency of youth in defining who they are in both societies (Haayen, 2016)

Much research also concluded that the second and later generations of the diaspora communities tend to construct a hybrid identity or a third space of in-betweenness as a response to the difficulty of “straddling two worlds” (Brocket, 2020). For young immigrants, the lack of belonging might even create an impact on their academic performances and future careers (Allen et al., 2018; Borman et al., 2019). Because they have to deal with the struggle of belonging since they were born or from a very young age, young immigrants encounter more conflicting identities when defining themselves in relation to their surroundings.

Different from the first generation of immigrants who still have a strong connection and attachment to the homeland and tend to find belonging in the local migrant communities, choosing between assimilation or transnationalism is a common question within the later generations of diaspora communities. The study of Pyke & Dang (2003) suggested Korean and Vietnamese second-generation migrants in America used concepts such as “FOB” (“Fresh Off the Boat”), “Whitewashed” and bicultural middle as symbolic devices to mark and maintain internal social boundaries among co-ethnic peers and practice internalized racism. These terms were reported to define who is “too ethnic” (FOB), “too assimilated” (Whitewashed), or who can balance Americanization with an ethnic identity. Due to the acculturative extremes created by internalized racism, the “bicultural middle” migrants with which most respondents in the study sample identified, are the “normal” safe, non-stigmatized ones. Similarly, when researching the group of the second generation of Palestinians in in New Jersey, Brocket (2020) argued for the concept of “positioned belongings”. This concept was created to help them navigate the feeling of exclusion and “in-



betweenness” while positioning the second-generation “self”. These “positioned belongings” are meant to help them keep their Palestinian authenticity while justifying their upbringing in the US.

Across nations, research has found different ways that Vietnamese second-generation migrants used to define their hybrid identities (Pham and Kraus, 2024). For example, research into Vietnamese second-generation immigrants in the Czech Republic suggested multiple hybrid identities that they employed to understand their in-betweenness and at the same time to find belonging in groups of people with similar experiences. The second generation of Vietnamese in the Czech Republic usually describe themselves as “banana” to denote the differences between their distinguished “yellow” Vietnamese appearances and their “white” Czech soul inside. The hybrid identities were mostly created when the second-generation Vietnamese experienced various forms of exclusion from Czech society and also from their own diaspora communities. However, according to Pham & Kraus (2024), the hybrid identities of the second-generation members of the Vietnamese Czech community are defined by a certain freedom in selecting sociocultural norms from the two cultures, and the identities were used to deal with the lack of belonging to either Czech or Vietnamese cultures. For other groups of second-generation Vietnamese communities in the UK and Australia, research has shown similar patterns of developing hybrid identities as ways of identifying themselves and finding belongings. However, these hybrid identities are all different from each other because of the variations in the culture of the host society (Pham & Kraus, 2024).

The novel ways of defining “self” and “others” were created by groups of young immigrants to make sense of their “unique” experiences. “Banana” is how the young Vietnamese in the Czech Republic cope with their disconnections and discriminations in the Vietnamese communities and, at the same time, the socialization and exclusion in mainstream Czech society. For the Palestine group, their “positioned belongings” are to help them carry the

Palestinian authentic identity to “continue the intergenerational transmission of memory and heritage” while being racialized and excluded in American society. Similarly, I would argue that the online communities of the second generation of the Vietnamese diaspora are creating a “fourth space” of interactions in response to the exclusions from their homeland, host societies, and local communities. Young members of the Vietnamese diaspora tend to face unique struggles that are different from their parents, grandparents, or established communities. Although they are likely to immerse in the culture of the host societies more than the older generations, they still face racism and exclusion as members of an ethnic community. Keeping their ethnic identity is also the immense pressure from the older generation and their ethnic community. Therefore, the Vietnamese second and later generations feel the need to develop belonging from somewhere else and aim to find collective understanding and sentiments with other Vietnamese youngsters worldwide. In other words, their hybrid positions became the foundation for their ethnic online identity. With this online representation and community formation, they do not aim to be associated with the mainstream in the host society, homeland, or ethnic/cultural community but construct new identities of Vietnamese that is unique to the Vietnamese young generations. Understanding these new novel identities will help to understand what characterizes the cultural and ethnic identity of young Vietnamese people. In addition, we could understand how the community creates a sense of belonging for its members and whether this community formation is significant in the lives of the younger generations.

### **2.3 The online communities of young immigrants**

For youngsters in the era of digitalization, there are no differences between online and offline activities. Chatting with friends online, or looking up information online are daily practices that youngsters do nowadays (Dekker et al., 2015). Research has concluded that people who were born in the social media era use online representations and online communities not only

to express themselves and connect with friends but also to interpret and shape their surroundings (Aguirre & Davies, 2015). As identity is not something static but something that constantly evolves and changes, through interacting with fellows, youngsters understand their shared identity or formulate communities based on their own cultural experiences.

As mentioned in the previous section, ethnic identity is defined as a multidimensional construct that concerns attitudes, feelings, and perceptions of group membership, self-image, ethnic affiliation, and also ingroup and intergroup attitudes (Ting-Toomey et al., 2000).

Research has shown that online communities support ethnic identification (both inter- and intra-ethnic identity) and find a sense of ethnic belonging (Dekker et al., 2015). Both intra- and inter-ethnic contacts have been argued to benefit members of the ethnic communities. For a long time, interethnic contact has been considered an essential condition for social integration. Since social media facilitates communities based on interest or acquaintance rather than geography or social status (Haythornthwaite, 2005), it provides infrastructure for several types of interethnic connections and communications which used to be seen as weak ties. Meanwhile, research warns about the impact of intra-ethnic contact in marginalizing the migrant groups as they created “virtual enclaves” for members of the ethnic group (Komito & Bates, 2009). However, other research also pointed out the importance of intra-ethnic communities as people come together on social media to voice out the shared needs of the minority group to larger societies (Kissau, 2012; Spaiser, 2012)

The Vietnamese online communities such as @phodaculture are intra-ethnic communities where members get together based on shared ethnic identities. In the social situations where they are embedded in multiple social contexts, the young immigrants often struggle with discorded and sometimes contesting identities, therefore, this space is created to negotiate their cultural identities. Therefore, I would argue that Vietnamese online communities of younger generations are constructing a “fourth space” of interactions about their ethnicity,

which is distinguished from the spaces of their residential societies, their former homeland, and also of the local ethnic community. In that context, social media provides youngsters the compromises between different dimensions of their identity. This phenomenon, called “reflexive racialization”, does not mean that they try to erase or strengthen their identities but rather redefine their ethnic and cultural identities through social media interactions (Parker & Song, 2006). It is also important to emphasize that the online communities of young Vietnamese diasporic members such as @phodaculture are built from a collection of curated content from a large group of Vietnamese people from all over the world. The owner of the @phodaculture account seems to play the role of the administrator of the online community rather than the sole creator of the online cultural ideology. This mix of contributions from a large group of users showed the demands of connections and finding commonality among members of the diaspora. Last but not least, in a non-hierarchical space of social media, other members and Internet users could contribute comments and replies based on their interpretation and experiences with the Vietnamese culture. All in all, during this process of constantly creating, mixing, sharing content, and also commenting, liking, and giving replies, new ideologies are shared and related, but there are also conflicts, negotiations, and compromises. Most importantly, from these interactions, new Vietnamese identities for the young generation is being constructed and maintained.

### Chapter 3: Methodology Approach

This study aims to understand the novel method of constructing ethnic identities and the significant influences of the online diasporic community on the young immigrants of the Vietnamese diaspora. Therefore, the study necessitates a methodological approach that must help to depict the whole picture of the phenomenon and at the same time dig deeper into explaining the experiences of the young immigrants who are suggested to be directly

influenced by the issue. The three particular requirements of the research design are defined as follows. First, the study's methodological approach must enable the researcher to investigate the strategy employed to construct Vietnamese identities. Second, it must help understand the types of identities presented in the online community. Lastly, the study must enable the researcher to grasp Vietnamese young immigrants' experiences, reactions, and interpretations of the online ethnic representations.

A mixed-method approach to collecting and analyzing empirical data was formulated based on the aforementioned goals. This mixed-method design includes two major methods: content analysis with a focus on digital discourse analysis and focus group interviews. With a methodological triangulation approach (Maggs-Rapport, 2000), the two methods will be employed to mostly independently collect and analyze data. At several steps, the materials and results of the analysis from one part will be used to collect and make sense of the data from the other part. Later, I will mention and give justifications for the interactions between the two methods. At the very end of the analysis, the results from the two methods will then be combined to compare, interpret, and further understand the relationship of different datasets, which is argued to increase the validity of the researched results.

### **3.1 The online community selection and the target group of participants**

Although currently, several online Vietnamese diaspora communities attract the attention of a great number of Internet users, choosing the appropriate community that could most represent the significance of the issue and help to answer the research question, is essential in this study. After considering the objectives of the study and also the contexts of the Vietnamese diaspora, several criteria for choosing the community were decided. First, the online community must facilitate spaces for virtual interactions among sub-groups of young Vietnamese immigrants, which include two major separate groups: Vietnamese youngsters

living outside the country and people from the 1.5/second/third generations of Vietnamese immigrants. Second, the online community must be active on social media. The activeness of the online community is reflected in the daily postings and daily interactions on the platform. This criterion is to ensure that the collected data is up-to-date and most relevant to the group of target audience. Third, there must be large engagement and interactions within the community, and the interactions occur between the administrators of the community and their users and among members of the community. In online communities, online engagements and interactions are meaningful as sociocultural relationships are mediated and recognized via connectivity. In other words, through these daily interactions and engagements, community building and a shared ideology will be created for members of the community (Alinejad, 2019; Ponzanesi, 2020)

After the preliminary research, the online community @phodaculture or Phở Da Culture on Instagram was selected as the focus of this study. Phở Da Culture or @phodaculture was first founded in 2020 under the name 3SC (the selection of this name was not explained or was deleted by the community). At the time, the community was oriented on only selling shirts, goods, and products featuring Vietnamese culture. In the summer of 2023, the community changed its name to “Phở Da Culture”, which can be properly read as “Phở The Culture”. This title of the community effectively reflects the culture of the community which places Vietnamese food at the center of the culture. The change from “the” to “da” also shows the casual, informal, playful, and humorous nature of this online community.

This community was chosen because it fulfilled several criteria of the Vietnamese diasporic online community which are argued to help answer the research questions. First, the major proportion of the audience of this community are Vietnamese recent migrants and the younger generations of the Vietnamese diaspora. Second, this online community has the highest number of followers (363,000 followers, on 05/09/2024). Their active engagement on

social media is shown in the daily updates, posting, sharing, and commenting. On average, they have 2 to 3 new posts daily. Besides that, they share content created by their followers and their collaborating creators on Stories constantly (5 to 10 stories per day), create polls for their followers, and comment and reply comments on their posts throughout the day. Third, the online community attracts great engagement and interactions from Internet users. The constant interactions between members of an online community are argued to create a type of social relationship (Alinejad, 2019), which reinforces the impact of this online community on the daily interactions of Vietnamese younger immigrants on the Internet. Lastly, the representation of this community is the most inclusive of people from different regions both inside and outside Vietnam. Since the goal of this study is to understand the dynamic interactions among people from different geographical regions and sociocultural backgrounds, the inclusiveness helps to make sure that we can see how people from different regions of the world come together to create and construct Vietnamese online identities. It is important to note here that the content shown in this online community mostly comes from the American and Australian communities, and not so much from other communities such as European and Asian communities. However, looking into the comment sections, we can pick up comments from different regions such as European and Asian countries. This interaction might denote a universal representation of Vietnamese culture across continents and further implies the significant influence of this online community on the global network of the Vietnamese diaspora.

Regarding the participants for the focus group interviews, the study defines the profiles of two major groups of participants. The first group includes people from the younger generations of the Vietnamese diaspora. They might have Vietnamese parents or grandparents but were born and raised in a different country. I also include people from the 1.5 generation in this group. The 1.5 generation group includes people who were born in Vietnam but moved

to different countries during their childhood and adolescent years. This first group consists of people who have little to no opportunities to interact with the Vietnamese culture in Vietnam. Their interactions with Vietnamese culture mostly come from their parents and the diasporic communities in their regions. Another group of participants are international students and migrant workers under the age of 30 who have been living outside of the country for more than 5 years. These people spent their upbringings in Vietnam and most of their family and friends are still living in Vietnam. They moved to other countries to work and study. Depending on the situation, some of them might have plans to move back to Vietnam or stay permanently in the new country. This group of people represents a group of new migrants from Vietnam who have opportunities to access transnational knowledge and media from a young age, but they have strong attachments and foundations in Vietnamese culture in Vietnam (Tran, 2017). When designing the study, there were two arbitrary decisions that I made to filter out the participants. First, I chose to only recruit people under the age of 30 since this group of people grew up in the time of digitalization and especially social media. Research has shown that the younger generations of immigrant communities rely on online communications for social interactions and constructing ethnic identities (Dekker et al., 2015). Therefore, online communities and online interactions are particularly crucial to understanding the identity formation of this group of young people. Second, I chose a minimum of five years living outside of the country as the turning point for migrants and used this as one of the criteria to filter out the participants. I would argue that time is one important factor for the immigrant to understand new cultures, establish an attachment to the host society, and at the same time detach themselves from life in their homeland, and identify themselves with a diasporic community. Therefore, it is important to set up an appropriate threshold of time living as an immigrant to reflect the result of the study. Five years were chosen mainly based on my own and my fellows' experiences.



### 3.2 Design and sampling

As mentioned above, the study employs a mixed-method approach combining two parts: content analysis with a focus on digital discourse analysis and focus group interviews. This holistic research design was used to thoroughly depict and investigate the significance of the phenomenon.

The digital approach of this study is based on the premise that digital practices shape and reflect the cultural experiences of Internet users. Digital technologies have been shown to support the maintenance of thousands of online communities across the globe. Even with communities without physical spaces, certain customs and cultures can be developed and maintained via online practices. Within the context of this study case, the novel way of constructing a Vietnamese digital diaspora community is a new phenomenon, which is built mainly in the digital culture of Vietnamese descent. Therefore, content analysis with a focus on digital discourse analysis was chosen as the first method of collecting and analyzing data.

Content analysis combined with digital discourse analysis was used to investigate the method of constructing Vietnamese cultural identity and also to demonstrate the types of cultural identity. Since the online identity of this group had never been studied before, I wanted to entirely grasp the breadth of the phenomenon by capturing all of the patterns of sentiments, objects, and topics, and then filtering the most common and relevant matter constructing the cultural identity within the online community. This objective requires a great number of posts to be collected, interpreted, and analyzed in a structured and consistent method. Therefore, the ethnographic content analysis was chosen due to its semi-structured original protocol of coding, describing, and interpreting the data (Altheide, 1987). However, digital discourse analysis was also employed in explaining the key elements and key incidents. With digital discourse analysis, the focus is on 4 aspects: *texts*, *contexts*, *actions and interactions*, and

*power and ideology* (Jones, Chik & Hafner, 2015), which could fill in the weakness of the content analysis method, which is losing the context of media text. This method is particularly helpful in thoroughly understanding and making sense of key posts, the interactions, the uptakes, and also the contexts of interactions.

The data for the content analysis was collected by following, collecting posts, and noting down activities of the online community in three months from the beginning of April to the end of June 2024. To avoid the bias of the researcher, all posts were collected and all information about the posts (links, captions, hashtags, tagged users, music links, thumbnails) was noted down and passed the first round of coding. This step also helped me as the researcher to get familiar with the data and grasp the common sentiments of the community. I also noted down any outstanding and significant incidents in those three months. In total, there were 250 posts collected. However, after several rounds of coding and realizing the repeated theme in the new posts, I decided to stop at the 191st post. This is considered the saturation point of the data when no new information is added that would be meaningful to the result of the analysis (quantilop, 2024). After coding and filtering irrelevant categories (for example, advertising posts, categories related to youth language, and American culture), several posts were also excluded from further analysis. Therefore, only 160 posts were analyzed in their full contexts and further interpretation. There were 188 comments collected to contextualize the interactions toward the posts. These comments were chosen as the most relevant to the corresponding posts or add meaningful interpretations to the main themes which were deducted after analysing all the posts.

After the content analysis, the focus group interviews were conducted. The main goal of the focus group is to examine the interactions, reactions, and interpretations of the target audience to the representation of Vietnamese cultural identities in the online community.

Focus groups were chosen due to their ability to collect information about what people think,

how they think, and why, but also because it is considered the best method for capturing community perceptions (Simich et al., 2009). Compared to one-on-one interviews, focus groups are useful in assisting in reaching the objective of the study, which is to investigate how members of the Vietnamese diaspora co-create knowledge via consuming social media content together (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000 as cited in Simich et al., 2009). The way participants interpret the content in groups is how members of the Vietnamese diaspora *together* make sense of and construct new Vietnamese identities. Therefore, the group interactions must be the focus of the study. In this study's focus groups, participants are given time to watch the contents from the corpus of online posts, and then they discuss their understandings in the group with other participants. The focus group also includes several open-ended questions about the social media behaviors of Vietnamese young immigrants and their perception of Vietnamese identities (see APPENDIX B for the focus group interview guideline).

It is important to realize that within this online community, the relationships between diasporic members with the homeland start from zero to full attachment. In other words, some of them might barely know about Vietnam and online communities are the only place to get more knowledge about the culture. On the contrary, some of them are people from Vietnam and their identities are attached to Vietnam's national and cultural identity. To negotiate a unity of Vietnamese identity, the online community needs to create a space for shared ideologies while facilitating the gaps in knowledge and experiences among these different groups. Understanding the perceptions of different groups of Vietnamese immigrants about these contents is therefore one of the main goals for investigating the significant impact of the online community. Moreover, the reactions in different social settings and with different immigrant groups are argued to affect the ways of constructing their cultural identities. Therefore, one of the requirements of the research design is to include

diverse group participants. Sorting and formulating focus groups with participants from different backgrounds is also suggested to help answer the research question. Following Finch and Lewis's (2003) suggestion, forming focus groups should be the balance between heterogeneity and homogeneity, when formulating focus groups, I also aimed to form groups with at least 4 participants (2 participants from the group of second-generation Vietnamese immigrants, and 2 participants from the group of Vietnamese international student or skilled migrant workers). This formation could assist participants in being comfortable to share their experiences while still being open to discussing different experiences/opinions. However, due to the conflicting schedules of participants, I decided to form focus groups with only two participants who had different upbringings and living experiences. For example, one Vietnamese Dutch participant must be in the focus group with another participant who spent most of their childhood in Vietnam. Even when participants have quite similar backgrounds (coming from the same city, studying the same program), one of them should spend time living abroad during their childhood. In other words, I focus on the between-group interactions to investigate identity construction when they are in a group with someone having different backgrounds. As the study aims to study the ability of the online community to construct Vietnamese identities in multicultural environments, these heterogeneous settings could help to reach the objective of the study. However, I am aware that the lack of homogeneity in the focus groups might affect the responses from participants since they might be more socially conscious of other participants from different sub-groups of immigrants.

The demographical information about the participants is provided in Table 1. The method of recruiting them was sharing the recruiting link online and the participants signed up voluntarily. However, since they are in the circle of the researcher's social media connections, there might be bias in the results of the analysis since all of them come from similar

backgrounds such as university students and living in the Noord-Brabant province. Due to the constraints of time, location, and several personal reasons, the study aimed to reach the highest number of participants but could not reach the saturation point of the data. It is also noted that more participants would like to join but due to their personal reasons (the study took place during a summer vacation month), they could not join the study. In the future, the following research could expand this group of participants and collect different interpretations from more diverse perspectives.

In total, four focus groups were conducted with the first three groups including two people, and the last one was conducted as a one-on-one interview. (The participant of focus group 4 was supposed to do the interview with her husband who is a 1.5-generation Vietnamese immigrant, but because of an emergent situation, he could not make it in the focus group, so I decided to interview without him). Therefore, the last focus group will pay more attention to the perception of the Vietnamese cultural identity of the participant without paying attention to the social and cultural identity construction.

The first focus group includes two Vietnamese international students. One of them has been living in the Netherlands for five years as an international university student. The other person spent two years in Denmark during their childhood but lived in Vietnam most of their life before moving to the Netherlands 5 years ago. The second group includes one Vietnamese international student living in the Netherlands for almost 8 years and the other person is a Dutch Vietnamese who was born and raised in the Netherlands. The third group includes a Vietnamese international student who has lived in several countries throughout her childhood and currently lives in the Netherlands for higher education. The other person from the third focus group is a Dutch Vietnamese who was born and raised in the Netherlands. The last interview was with a Vietnamese person who studied in the Netherlands for higher education and currently works as a highly-skilled worker.

Two of the focus group interviews (focus groups 2 and 3) were conducted online and in English while the other two (focus groups 1 and 4) were conducted in-person and in Vietnamese. The choice of language and location were decided by the participants. Before doing the focus groups, they were asked to sign a consent form to use their answers in research analysis and use direct quotations when reporting the results of the study. However, their names were pseudonymized, so they could not be used to trace back to them. They were all introduced to the aims and context of the study before signing up for the focus group. In the signing-up link, they filled in demographic information by themselves. They were also given chances to ask about terms, concepts, and ground rules of the focus groups before taking part in the study. The time for the interviews ranged from 1 hour 15 minutes to 1 hour 45 minutes. The focus group interviews focused on collecting their interpretations and reactions to the three online posts. There were also several questions to understand more about the reactions and interpretations that they provided.

*Table 1: The overview of all participants of the focus group interviews*

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years of living in Vietnam</b>	<b>Years of living outside of Vietnam</b>	<b>Generation</b>
1	Linh	24	19	5	First generation
1	Van	23	16	7	First generation
2	Mai	26	18	NL almost 8 years, Canada 4 months	First generation

2	John	20	0	Born and raised in the Netherlands, 20 years now	Second generation
3	Gabriel	24	Around 15-16 years	8 years in different countries	First generation
3	Lily	22	0	Born and raised in the Netherlands, 22 years now	Second generation
4	Thao	25	19	6	First generation

After analyzing the content of the online community, the results of the analysis were used to choose the three representative posts. As the three posts were used as the materials for conducting focus groups, the researcher focused on the most common topics and types of content which were repeated many times in the online community. The three selected topics are *family gatherings with food as the core connecting members of the community, the harsh love of Vietnamese parents, and body-shaming in the Vietnamese community*. (See APPENDIX A for the information about the three posts).

### 3.3 Analysis Approach

#### 3.4.1 Content Analysis

Using the guideline of inductive thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke (2006), this part of the analysis is to investigate the novel methods of constructing the Vietnamese online identity. The analysis did not only focus on detecting patterns and synthesizing themes but also included an ethnographical approach to contextualize the data. The analysis is an iterative

process with a clear protocol to help me not to miss any aspect of the data. The analysis went through several steps. The first step, which is following and collecting all posts from April to June of 2024, helped me to familiarize myself with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All the information such as captions, hashtags, tagged accounts, etc. were noted without judging the relevance and significance of the information. In the next step, I removed all advertising posts since the purposes of these posts are irrelevant to the research question. The contents then went through several steps of coding:

- Interpreting the literal meanings/messages of the content
- Code relevant pieces of information: one post could be coded into several categories, but there must be the least amount of themes in total.
- Their types of representations: sentiments, emotions, and nature of the content
- Objects, mindsets, etc that could help to associate the post with Vietnamese culture

All of the above coding steps correspond with the second phase of the thematic analysis of Braun & Clarke (2006). The key to coding is generating as many generic themes/patterns as possible but keeping the number of themes as small as possible. In other words, all the themes must reflect all features but avoid redundancy and creating trivial themes that might prevent me as the analyst from detecting related patterns. After collecting all the themes, some themes and posts were deleted since they were not relevant to the research question. The deleted themes include *Asian, youth language, pun lines, and American culture*. Any post that was coded only with the theme of *Food* was reported but not analyzed further since they represent a repeated way of association. The codes with general themes were refined and divided into specific themes so that all the codes must represent the generic features of the online community. For example, the theme "*habits/customs/ways of thinking*" was first suggested to group codes that reflect similar patterns of representing Vietnamese culture. However, after coding all posts, it was decided as too general and could not describe the



topics of the codes thoroughly. Therefore, each code with this theme was then divided into other themes, or new themes were created to better reflect the signature and meanings of the codes. After the refining step, all of these themes were summarized to find a consistent goal, pattern, and nature of the content. 188 comments were also collected to further investigate the uptake of the viewers. Only comments with relevant and interesting reactions to the posts were collected and analyzed. Although the comments were collected mostly to investigate the disagreement or agreement amongst members of the online community, any comments with unexpected reactions and interpretations were also noted to further understand how the community facilitates different reactions from its members. It should be noted that the comments were collected after the themes of the content analysis were derived. Therefore, I also used the results of the content analysis to pay more attention to comments that mentioned the common themes or reacted to the common themes.

Besides coding and generating themes, I also paid attention to the motivations of the community, and their reasons for keeping an online community. The purposes of the online community were mostly shown in the captions or the comments made by the administrators of the online community. This information is supposed to assist in making sense of the online posts.

#### *3.4.2 Focus Group*

There are three main topics in the focus group including *social media behaviors, constructing a Vietnamese identity through reacting to online content, and the perception of the Vietnamese identity*. The analysis was done according to the structure of the focus group guidelines. For each topic, all the interpretations of the participants, and any discrepancies and similarities in the reactions and interactions of participants were noted. In particular, the study focused on the variations in interpreting Vietnamese representations and constructing the Vietnamese identity of people from different backgrounds. For example, a person

spending childhood in Vietnam might have different reactions and interpretations from someone who spent their entire life in the Netherlands. Therefore, the comparisons between participants from different cultural backgrounds are essential here. Moreover, it is suggested that there might be intergroup variations in interactions. When participants are aware of the similarities and differences between them and the other person in the focus group discussion, they might adjust their reactions according to the other person. Therefore, the organization of their discussions must also be paid attention to.

To capture the co-creation of knowledge through interactive dialogue among participants, both the statements of participants and how the statements were constructed through discussions were the analytic focus. Holstein and Grubrium (2004, as cited in Jordan et al., 2007) argued that as participants collectively produce meaning in and through interaction, narratives from participants must be analyzed to see *what* was said and also *how* the narratives were produced in the interactions. This method of analysis was specifically applied in the second part of the focus groups investigating *the construction of the Vietnamese identity through consuming social media content together*. As authentic representation is something fluid and non-fixed, depending on the local contexts and experiences with the culture, people might have different interpretations of cultural identities and cultural products (Banks, 2013). Being in different cultural settings with different groups of people, participants might be influenced or adjusted to share and produce an ad hoc understanding of Vietnamese identities. These variations would be valuable to document certain power relations within the Vietnamese diaspora. Therefore, intergroup variations of interaction are valuable and were reported and paid attention to.

Although the sample of participants in this study was diverse and no participant has the exact upbringing and educational background as someone else, for the sake of simplicity, I categorized focus groups 1 and 4 are within-group, and focus groups 2 and 3 are between-

group. The first focus group is Linh and Van, two close friends who are from the same city in Vietnam, arrived in the Netherlands around similar times, and are doing the same program at Tilburg University. They are also the only group indicating that they would like to do the interview with their close friends. The only difference between them is that Van lived two years in Denmark when she was 7 to 8 years old, meanwhile, Linh spent her whole childhood in Vietnam. This difference was mentioned by Van in how she perceived Vietnamese life differently after coming back from Denmark. However, this difference is not significant in her perspective of Vietnam, therefore, their group was categorized as having within-group interaction. The fourth focus group was categorized as within-group interaction although this group included only Thao, a Vietnamese girl who moved to the Netherlands 6 years ago for higher education, and now has her own family and works as a highly-skilled migrant for a Dutch company. She was supposed to do the focus group with her husband, a Dutch Vietnamese 1.5-generation migrant, but he could not make it at the last minute. Therefore, the interaction in this group was mostly between Thao and me, who also has a similar background as her, and the interaction was categorized as within-group. To minimize the influence of the interviewer in this one-on-one interview, I mainly focused on asking questions and giving follow-up questions to interpret her answers. When she specifically asked for the interpretations of the three pieces of online content, I gave her my interpretation but let her further explain what she thought about the content. The other two focus groups have similar compositions of participants: one Vietnamese international student and one Dutch Vietnamese who are the second generation of the diaspora.

As Tran (2017) noted, this kind of interactive interview does not depict or understand the interactions in everyday life. It is a “constructed scenario” where participants are placed in different scenarios to interpret, discuss, and construct a Vietnamese identity from the media they consume. The focus groups are divided into three main parts corresponding with three

main topics. The second part is the most important since most interactions between participants took place in this part. They watched the content together and then interpreted and discussed the meanings and the Vietnamese representations in the three social media content. The first and the third part of the focus groups were used to understand their familiarity with social media content from the diaspora and their perception of their Vietnamese identity. This information might help to explain the differences in their interpretations of the media content.

After performing both the content analysis and focus group analysis, the results were then combined and compared. The content analysis with a focus on digital discourse analysis was used to understand the methods of constructing the Vietnamese online diasporic identity and the types of identity among the group of young immigrants. The results from the focus group were used to further explain the experiences of the group of Vietnamese young immigrants in the Netherlands when consuming online diasporic content. The analysis of focus groups was also used to understand whether the cultural identity in online content might create a significant influence on the lives of young immigrants. By combining the two parts of the analyses, the validity of the study was emphasized by combining and comparing different aspects of the phenomenon.

## Chapter 4: Results

### 4.1 Content Analysis

There are in total 160 posts, and 188 comments from the online community @phodaculture, which were collected and analyzed. After coding and synthesizing themes (as mentioned in the Analysis Approach section) three main aspects of the community were detected as the method of shaping the online representation and forming a diasporic community. The three aspects are *the groups of people that the content represents, the objects/mindsets/habits they used to associate with the Vietnamese culture, and the topics constantly discussed in the*

*community* (see Table 2 for the full lists of categories of the three aspects). Categories from one aspect tend to be related to categories from other aspects, which is to create a repeated message or discourse. For example, young immigrants usually make fun of their parents to address the harsh love of Vietnamese parents; or, foreign friends of Vietnamese people must also understand and endure the harsh love of Vietnamese parents if they want to be a part of the family. Therefore, after assigning all the codings, I grouped corresponding categories from different aspects into meaningful relations and concluded three themes or three representative features of the Vietnamese community: *a community of unity and inclusiveness, embracing the negative stereotypes to have fun and collectively heal, and a community of family, food culture, and resilience.*

#### *4.1.1 Methods of constructing Vietnamese online identities and diasporic community*

There are in total 278 instances of codes in 160 posts. *Stereotype* and *Food* themes account for the highest number with correspondingly 37 and 34 instances. For the *Stereotype* theme, most are negative stereotypes about Vietnamese culture such as gossiping, partying, being rude, and loud; but there are also neutral stereotypes such as the nail salon business, using fish sauce in every cuisine, Vietnamese dad jokes, or sitting with low stools. Most importantly, the subjects of these stereotypes are mostly Vietnamese parents and several common characters from the older generations. The character “Chú hai” has been used frequently to refer to an unspecified middle-aged man who always enjoyed “too much” during every Vietnamese family gathering. Nail technicians are usually associated with the stereotype of gossiping and being nosy about others’ business. Other stereotypes such as the culture of sitting on low stools next to the streets in Vietnam and Vietnamese women wearing “đồ bộ” (pajamas) outside of their house have been used repeatedly in the content of this online community. The use of these negative stereotypes is to mock certain peculiar things in the Vietnamese culture, especially from the perspectives of the younger generations toward

older generations. Using negative stereotypes about their own culture to create humor could be a way of being satirical and challenging the stereotypes. This is true in the case of the stereotype of gossiping associated with nail technicians. This group of people is the common target of mocking in the online community, but the evocation of the stereotype is actually to clarify that their gossip is not about the customers but the stories of their families, and about something or somebody who was not there at the moment. However, in most of the posts from the online community, stereotypes are simply used to create humorous relatable mocking sentiments within the younger groups.

Food was also commonly used to create connections with other users. As Vietnam has been known for its rich and flavourful food culture, foods, and food names were used constantly in the interactions between users. Food names were mentioned in the post to create pun lines or even new slang. For example, within this online community “phở” is the substitute for “for” in any possible situation. The community also introduced new foods and shared good restaurants. The most common content about food is creating “food battles”. Phở and Bún bò Huế battle is the most common one that people can devote “everything” to argue for the “superiority” of their favorite dishes. Most of the time, the results of these battles are not which food/dish is better, but it is normally the pride in the diversity and tastiness of Vietnamese food culture. Besides simply mentioning the foods or using food-related pun lines, some of them emphasize the cultures around the foods. For example, the essence of Vietnamese cuisine is the freshness of ingredients. In several posts shared by @phodaculture, people can point out the freshness of Vietnamese foods in these contents. Even with this simple way of creating content from the Vietnamese food culture, users were intrigued to interact with the post and the owners of the account. In another kind of post, the trauma of eating “difficult” foods, was used in different ways. They are also used to create nostalgic and relatable content but instead of focusing on pride and joy, the post relates to viewers through

the challenges when living in a Vietnamese household and the misunderstandings from older generations. The joy when eating Vietnamese foods, sharing foods, and the love from Vietnamese parents are all related to the Vietnamese food culture and were highlighted in the contents of the online community.

In terms of the perspectives and groups of people mentioned in the content, the community represents the experiences of people from the later generations of the Vietnamese diaspora, the group of half-Vietnamese people, foreign friends of Vietnamese people, and a bit of perspective of Vietnamese people from Vietnam (I will specify why it is “a bit of” later in the analysis). Among them, most of the posts from this online community are from the perspective of the younger generations of the Vietnamese diaspora. They could be 1.5, 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation. The shared experiences of these people are that their perception of Vietnamese is mostly through family interactions and ethnic community interactions. Therefore, most of the posts from this group of people were placed in the contexts of family interactions and community gatherings. Non-Vietnamese people’s perspectives are also common within the online community with 20 instances in all social media posts. According to these content creators, although non-Vietnamese people are welcome in the community, they need to go through a rite of passage which includes training on drinking capacity during family gatherings, helping and respecting elderly family members, and being a part of the “free child labor” group within the families.

All in all, all three aspects that were used to construct a Vietnamese identity are *groups of people that the contents represent, methods of associating them with the Vietnamese culture, and the common topics mentioned in the online community*. Table 2 includes all aspects and their different categories. They are also the final codes that were used to code 160 posts from @phodaculture.

Table 2: The three aspects of the online community which were coded

<b>Groups of people that the content represents</b>	<b>Methods of associating with the Vietnamese culture</b>	<b>Common topics</b>
Young immigrants who were born in the new country (1.5, second or later generations of the diaspora community)	The use of Vietnamese language	Harsh love from Vietnamese parents: body shaming, punishment, conservatism, using their children as free labor, (this also applies to non-Viet and mixed Viet)
Half-Vietnamese people	Using stereotypes (both bad and good)	Partying culture: drinking, singing, karaoke, chú hai, gossiping
Foreign friends of Vietnamese people	Evoking a battle	Family loving moments
(a bit of) Vietnamese people from Vietnam	Using foods and food-related pun words	Remember the roots, the culture, the language.
	Making fun of their parents	Being aggressive, loud, and a bit rude ( in a lot of situations: between husband and wife, with a non-Viet friend)



	<p>Evoking emotions:  humorous, relatable,  nostalgia, touching (family),  excitement (this is  particularly related to the  party, hip hop culture,  American street culture),  pride (foods, Vietnamese  celebrities )</p>	<p>The difficulty of the second  generation when growing up  in a new country but proud  of their identity.</p>
	<p>The mindset of  Inclusiveness and unity  (don't distinguish between  North, South, from Vietnam  or not from Vietnam,  women)</p>	<p>The warmness in the  Vietnamese community  when sharing foods, ....</p>
	<p>Messages for  encouragement, unitedness,  collectiveness</p>	<p>Food is essential. It is not  only about food but more  about how you enjoy it, eat  it, and share it with other  people.</p>

After having all the methods that were used in constructing the Vietnamese identity and forming the online community, I synthesized them into three major themes which are considered the distinguished features of the Vietnamese online community @phodaculture. In the next sub-sections, I will go through each of them to understand how these themes were constructed as well as their meanings to the online community.

#### *4.1.2 A community of unity and inclusiveness*

Although the @phodaculture community targets Vietnamese audiences, the community does not aim to represent just one identity or one experience. In contrast, one of the clear goals of the community is to represent the diverse experiences of different groups of people who are from the Vietnamese diaspora or related to the Vietnamese culture. As mentioned in the previous parts, most of the content was formulated from the perspectives of the young generations (1.5, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generations) of the Vietnamese diaspora. However, the experiences of other groups such as non-Vietnamese, mixed-Vietnamese people, and Vietnamese people from Vietnam were all used in the content of the online community.

To the younger generations of the Vietnamese diaspora community, mocking and making fun of their Vietnamese parents is one of the common ways to create relatable sentiments within the community. For example, in one of the posts celebrating the first anniversary of the community, a video showing a “fight” between a Vietnamese mom and her son was reposted. The video started with a mom shouting loudly at her son before her son started teasing her with a sudden break dance. The mom started chasing him to his room while holding a pink plushie and then kicked the door as she accelerated to “hit” her son. The short video ended there without an ending, leaving people with the question of whether the son was hit by his mom. According to the administrator, this post helped to “Kick off” the community and set the foundation for later content of the community. Similarly to this post, Vietnamese parents

in other posts are being mocked because of their aggression towards their kids, body-shaming their kids, their broken Vietlish, and several peculiar things that they do at home.

From the perspective of young immigrants, the stereotype of “chú hai” (“first uncle”) was frequently used to create a relatable sentiment. Although “chú hai” means “my first uncle” in the Southern Vietnamese dialect, the character “chú hai” in this online community is not necessarily the brother of anyone’s father. Instead, in the context of the online community, “chú Hai” here is usually depicted as a middle-aged man who shamelessly has “fun”, drinks, and sings karaoke in any family, community, or public gatherings. For example, in one of the videos, a man is singing karaoke loudly in a nail salon. In the comment section, the administrator added a comment saying “Someone please get their Chu Hai”, and this comment received 5646 likes from other viewers. Since the interactions of the young generations with Vietnamese culture are limited in the family and community contexts, other peculiar things happening during Vietnamese family gatherings were constantly mocked to create humor. These peculiar things include, for example, receiving endless “nosey” questions from relatives, or the division of adult and kid tables in a family big gathering.

Besides this large amount of posts from the perspective of the young generation, the online community also represents the perspectives and experiences of other groups of people including mixed-Vietnamese people, foreign friends of Vietnamese people, and a bit of perspective of Vietnamese people from Vietnam. There are repeated discourses when representing the experiences of each group.

The mixed Vietnamese experience is usually represented by the constant need to show if they are Vietnamese “enough”. In one video, a Vietnamese-Caucasian girl showed a “Vietnamese” straw broom as a core memory of being “hit” and “punished” by her Vietnamese mom. Especially, she emphasized the use of the “Vietnamese” straw broom and not just any random

broomstick to associate herself with the Vietnamese culture. Under her video is the caption: “Yes, after watching this, I consider her full Vietnamese \*cry and laugh emoji\*. Who else is mixed but was raised/disciplined 100% the Vietnamese way?”. In another post from @phodaculture online community, this common stereotype of “look foreign but Vietnamese inside” was challenged and addressed. In the video, a Nigerian-American-Vietnamese rapper was asked in English: “Can you say something in Vietnamese?” when he just performed a full Vietnamese rap song. Then the video was added with the meme audio “It was this moment that he knew he f\*\*\*\*\* up”. Although the video was posted to address the common reactions of Vietnamese people to a mixed person, the addition of the meme sound made the video light-hearted and appear as an inside joke. Under the video, several people saw the posts as funny and casual interactions, but there are also some others sharing how they were treated differently in the community because they did not look “Vietnamese enough”.

Foreign friends of Vietnamese people are also represented in this online community. Their common experience with Vietnamese culture is being tricked by their Vietnamese friends into saying something nasty in Vietnamese. For example, in several videos, Vietnamese people taught their friends to say “Đ\* M\*” or “Đ\* M\* mà” (“F\*\*\* you” in Vietnamese) while telling their friends that these phrases are compliments in Vietnamese. Due to the popularity of this kind of content, the meanings of these cursing phrases have replaced “What’s up?” or greetings among the younger generations of the Vietnamese diaspora in North America. The common use of these swearing words in the online community, consequently, denotes the “unserious” and “having fun” spirit of the Vietnamese online community where every foreign friend is welcome to join and be a part of the community. In a different kind of content, non-Vietnamese husbands or wives need to go through a “training” or a “rite of passage” to be accepted in the community. This training includes learning how to greet every Vietnamese

person in a family gathering from the elderly to young members of the family, learning how to drink with “chú hai”, and helping with the family business and house chores.

The Vietnamese American community was also one of the common themes with 14 instances being coded. In several videos, names of common locations of the Vietnamese American community were mentioned to create nostalgic and reminiscing moments. As we can see, to create shared experiences in online contexts, the community has focused on connecting with members through articulating mindsets or reenacting universal experiences. However, despite aiming for universal experiences, the connections with local spaces in online representations show that a sense of belonging in migrating experiences is still based on attachments to physical spaces. Due to the foundation of this online community in the American community, this type of content is allowed and successful in connecting members. This is especially interesting when comparing it with the Vietnamese experiences in Vietnam demonstrated in the content of @phodaculture. The experiences of Vietnamese people from Vietnam are not to create belonging and remembering. It seems that the Vietnamese experiences in Vietnam were only represented when they were consistent with the stereotypes of the Vietnamese diaspora communities. Partying culture, karaoke, and food culture are the three common topics of Vietnamese experiences that were represented in this online community. Besides, Vietnam, the former homeland of their parents or grandparents, only appears in the online community due to its amazing development, beautiful natural sceneries, and several strange habits. There is one type of content about experiences in Vietnam that has been repeated several times in the online community. The formula of this content includes a video showing a particular habit or cultural practice of Vietnamese people. The captions in the video are:

*“Nobody:*

*Absolutely nobody:”*

\*The name of the strange habit/cultural practice.\*

The caption under the videos is:

*“Only in Vietnam, part infinity \*infinity sign\*”*

The particular strange cultural experiences are, for example, gathering in parks to exercise at 4-5 a.m, the “crazy” unorganized traffic rules, the habit of being half naked on the streets of Vietnamese men, and so on. This type of content showed the distance between the younger group of immigrants with life in Vietnam. As their life in Vietnam is only through vacation trips with family and friends, the normal things in Vietnamese life appear as peculiar, and fascinating to them.

The unity and inclusiveness mindset does not only show in the groups of people that the online community represents, but it also shows in how the community protects each other. In several posts, the administrators of the online community commented and replied to hateful and divisive comments. In one of the posts where people showed a hateful attitude toward an Australian foreigner who speaks Vietnamese almost fluently and knows Vietnamese culture quite well, the administrator immediately commented and used their authority to stop the spreading of hate within the community. Their comment was pinned as the first comment which says:

*“PSA: If you're pressed about ethnicities (white, black, Asian) - This isn't the place for you. Pho Da Culture is inclusive for everyone here who either is part of the culture or appreciates the culture. If you're going to bring that negative energy into this space, you can click that "unfollow" button (or you'll get blocked), because no one has time for that \*V sign\*”*

In the post celebrating Black April Day (the title that the Vietnamese American community chose for the ending day of the Vietnam War) of the Vietnamese diaspora in the US, they explicitly mentioned the unity mindset that their community aimed to:

*“\*Disclaimer\* - This post is not intended to spark a political debate or create hostility towards each other in the comments. I also recognize that I did not distinguish the fact that “Black April” is a term that is commonly recognized by those affected by the war post-April 30, 1975. This is not meant to be a blanket statement/ generalization of the Vietnamese experience as whole 🙏*

*Please take today and this opportunity to see that moving forward together as Vietnamese people is the important thing. Can't spell community without UNITY 🙏”*

The goal of representing the diversity, unity, and inclusiveness of the Vietnamese diaspora is argued to be related to the lack of representing diverse Vietnamese diasporic experiences in the media of the host countries, the diaspora community, and also in Vietnam. Tran (2019) addressed the hierarchies and acts of silencing from both outside and inside of the Vietnamese diaspora. From outside of the community, especially in the media of the USA, the Vietnamese minority group has been fixed in the repeated narratives of refugees, boat people, and war victims. Silencing the varying refugee narratives allowed the American public to focus on the narrative between the “good refugees” and the “saving” imperialist nation. This story particularly plays an important role in removing America’s shameful past engaging in the Vietnam War and creating the refugee crisis (Espiritu, 2014). Tran (2017) argued that these repetitive stories have become fetishized (surrounding the images of pain and suffering) and are no more than capitalized commodities both within the mainstream media and academia. Gradually, they became the only authentic ones and are worth documenting and reporting, which consequently erases the diverse experiences within the diaspora.

From the inside of the diaspora, a great number of studies have pointed out that the transnational popularity of the popular culture of the diaspora community (Lieu, 2011; Tran, 2017, 2019) has enabled a group of members from high social classes in the former South Vietnamese society or members of the former political and military bodies emerge as cultural elites and gatekeepers of the diaspora community. Their political positions have dominated and defined the construction of the Vietnamese diaspora community in the US. Being not only an influential political group, their ideologies created the borderlines for appropriate cultural, educational, and heritage expressions of the diaspora. Besides these cultural elites, Vietnamese migrant experiences have been influenced by the narratives of the first generation. After settling as a community in the US, the reconstruction of the Vietnamese ethnic community which is rooted in the anti-communist ideology, and “the exile, uncertain transition, and arrival in an alien world” (Zhou & Bankston, 2000) took place. According to a younger cohort of Vietnamese American scholars, this anti-communist ideology has prevented the pluralization of Vietnamese migrating narratives as well as the expressions of young and emerging groups. Moreover, the anti-communist ideology imposed by the older generations might also prevent the community from progressing and moving forward while increasing social divisions among members of the diaspora community (Le, 2015). Last but not least, in the home country, the migrant experience of Vietnamese people has been limited by the problematic relationship between Vietnam and Viet Kieu since the end of the Vietnam War (Phong et al., 2000).

Despite emphasizing the diversity of different groups, the online community also would like to further highlight certain universal characteristics of Vietnamese people regardless of the regional and local contexts. According to them, the shared features are the determination and perseverance to grow and to win over the challenges. In the post about Black April Day mentioned, this commonality was highlighted: what distinguishes the Vietnamese community



regardless of regional differences is the ability and determination to go through challenges. By highlighting the differences and also emphasizing the commonality, the community would like to encourage the power of coming together to build a more progressive inclusive community. Owners of the @phodaculture community also insisted on being independent of politics to value the diversity of experiences of the group instead of the binary discourses created by sociopolitical division. Moreover, based on this inclusiveness of different groups and independence of political ideology, we could argue that the young generations of the Vietnamese diaspora would like to be free from the controls of the first generation and the conformation to the community conventions and beliefs. As mentioned above, the online community is building a “fourth space” that is not aligned with the mainstream culture of the host society, the homeland, and also the local communities. This fourth space would be where a hybrid identity of the Vietnamese diaspora can be constructed and be more relevant to the young generations and their sense of belonging.

Although unity and inclusiveness are the goals of the online community, the reactions of other users sometimes do not demonstrate the approval of this “ideal” scenario. There are still people who divide the community by emphasizing, for example, the accents of other people, the knowledge of someone about Vietnam, and the backgrounds of other people. These minor opinions have not been significant in the growth of the online community, so they were not further investigated in this study. However, the following study could take these opposing reactions as the beginning of the analysis to understand further the motivations for this conflict between different groups within the Vietnamese diaspora.

#### *4.1.3 Embracing the negative stereotypes to have fun and heal the collective traumatic memories*

As mentioned in the previous section, several negative stereotypes about the Vietnamese community were constantly used to construct Vietnamese online identities. The most common one was the “harsh love” of Vietnamese parents. Mocking Vietnamese parents (from

the previous theme) is not the only way of creating relatable content, but depicting Vietnamese parents as the “villains” in the childhood of all Vietnamese kids is even more common within this online community. Their harsh discipline and strict punishment are some of the common topics being used to create a shared memory among members. From verbal abuse, and physical punishment, to casual body-shaming, Vietnamese parents “traumatized” the childhood of Vietnamese kids. For example, in several posts, pets were disciplined by Vietnamese parents but still, parents treated them better than how they disciplined their children. Memes were commonly used to evoke traumatizing experiences to laugh it off and make the memories humorous and relatable. In Figure 1, three Vietnamese phrases were mentioned to trigger traumatic experiences by Vietnamese parents. The first phrase is “Found you in the trash”; the second one is “dumb as a dog” and the last one is “fat as a pig”.

Although these phrases are extreme insults to other people, they might be accepted when Vietnamese parents use them toward their own children. They could be interpreted as jokes, white lies or exaggerated expressions but also as a way of giving advice or disciplining their children. The meme did not express further the context of using these phrases but it is meant to be humorous while creating shared memories and understanding among users.

## Vietnamese Phrases That Cut Deep



@phodaculture

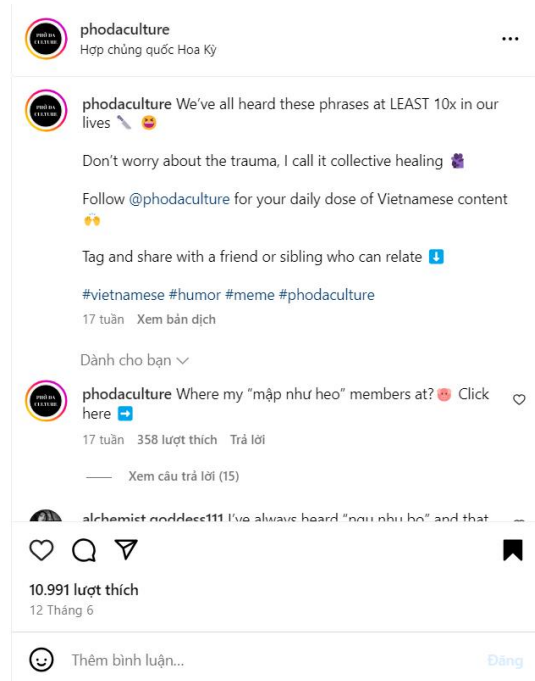


Figure 1: A meme about the harsh love of Vietnamese parents

In different cultures, people have different ways of educating and disciplining children. In Vietnamese culture and some other Asian cultures, parents rarely express love and care for their children through gentle words or actions. Since they pay more attention to the future of their children, they tend to express their love for their children through “hard” language, strict discipline, or even physical punishment. Therefore, these insulting phrases are harsh but accepted in certain contexts in Vietnamese culture. Using the traumatic memories created by their parents, the young generations would like to connect with other members by creating relatable and sympathetic sentiments while finding collective healing. According to them, the trauma of growing up as a Vietnamese immigrant kid should be shared to collectively heal all members. For example, under the post from Figure 1 is the caption:

*“We’ve all heard these phrases at LEAST 10x in our lives 🗑️ 😬*

*Don’t worry about the trauma, I call it collective healing 🧠”*

The evocation of negative stereotypes is, therefore, to help members with the healing process. By sharing and making it public, the meme creates a mindset that we are “on the same boat”, which helps the young generations understand their parents and release some stresses and traumatic memories. However, in the later part of the analysis, I will give more details about the interpretation and attitudes of the young immigrants about this harsh love; and, from the interactions in focus groups, we could further investigate different interpretations of the “harsh love” constructed in this meme.

Besides the harsh love from Vietnamese parents, family gatherings are usually depicted as “nightmares” for Vietnamese kids. The “rituals” during family gatherings are being body-shamed and asked “nosey” questions about their study, work, marriages, and even kids. In Figure 2, another meme about the situations when Vietnamese younger generations receive a collection of questions at every Vietnamese family gathering.



Figure 2

The Vietnamese community itself is stereotyped by the partying culture, gossiping, and the image of being aggressive, loud, and rude in any context. Within this context of the online community, they do not challenge the stereotypes but embrace and celebrate these negative stereotypes. In one of the videos, a girl sitting in her car addressed how she accepted that being *nhieu chuyện* (nosey/gossipy) runs in her blood. Although she did not explain why she thinks so, she just mentioned that as a Vietnamese she struggled with being nosey/gossipy and she accepted it is a part of her community's collective personality. This culture of gossiping tends to be associated with Vietnamese nail technicians. As the Vietnamese diaspora has been stereotypically associated with the nail industry, the stereotype of all Vietnamese nail techs gossiping *all the time* emphasizes this generalization about the community. The online community even promoted a culture of “ham choi” (“want to have fun”) in Vietnamese younger generations. As mentioned in one of the first posts about “ham choi”, ham choi is how his parents always describe him as lazy, not wanting to study, work, or endure difficulties. But now he interpreted “ham choi” differently. He realized that he might not be lazy but perhaps his interests and plans are just not aligned with his parents’ needs and expectations anymore. In the comment section of this post, there are a lot of comments approving the Ham Choi culture. Although “ham choi” is a new culture that the younger generations use to encourage others to change their perceptions about life goals, and to defy their parents’ expectations, it is becoming increasingly popular not only within the @phodaculture community but in other Vietnamese online communities.

As the above post explains ham choi culture, there are several reasons for celebrating the negative stereotypes about their own culture. First, it is simply to have fun and take life easily. The younger generations of the Vietnamese diaspora used to live according to the expectations of their immigrant parents, who spent their whole lives working and sacrificing their lives for the future of their children (Zhou & Bankston, 2000). However, this burden of

achieving material conditions sometimes creates clashes between generations. The young immigrants could not comprehend the struggles of their parents, or they no longer see working diligently as the only way of living, or they feel stressed when living with the overwhelming burden of their parents. Therefore, the culture of seeking fun is to help Vietnamese immigrant kids understand the conflicts with their parents, and reinterpret them to release the stress and see their life from a relaxing perspective.

The second reason is due to the stereotype of Vietnamese gang culture in the US. In fact, the USA is not the only country witnessing the rise of Vietnamese immigrants involved in illegal business and street gangs but also Germany, Canada, and the Czech Republic (Freidingerová & Nováková, 2021; Lam, 2015; Steinman, 2021; Tran, 2017). As one of the minority groups in host societies, a large portion of the Vietnamese immigrants, especially the young groups, were pushed to the margins and were exposed to certain subculture groups in the societies (Lam, 2015). Although Vietnamese diaspora communities have been framed as “model minorities”, in California for example, they are also racialized as “gang bangers” due to the increasing number of gang members from the Vietnamese communities (Zhou & Bankston, 2000). These stereotypes further pushed the communities to face discrimination and prejudice in the host societies (Freidingerová & Nováková, 2021; Tran, 2019). In the context of this online community, certain negative stereotypes such as drinking, partying, and singing were used to define the cultural characteristics of the Vietnamese communities. The fact that they focused on these stereotypes while making a borderline from criminal activities demonstrates their effort to change perceptions of people. The stereotype seems to be reinterpreted as simply enjoying life and having fun rather than committing crimes, which has been framed in the media.

Lastly, the partying culture of “nhậu” seems to support the inclusiveness of the community which was mentioned in the previous part as one of the key constructs of the community

identity. As the “nhậu” culture does not define age, gender, or race, anyone who would like to party and want to have fun in life can be a part of this community. The inclusiveness based on partying culture is particularly shown when Vietnamese people welcome someone who is not from the community. In one of the videos, a white boy dedicated time to making bánh mì, the famous Vietnamese-styled sandwich, from scratch. Under the video, there is a caption:

*“ When this guy turns 21, he’s definitely invited to the nhậu and lau 🍷 🍻 ”*

*I mean, he made his own pate 🙌 🙌 🙌 ”*

It seems that anyone respecting the authenticity of the Vietnamese food culture (however, they did not pay attention to the details of the cooking techniques) could be invited to the Vietnamese drinking parties or “nhậu and lẩu” culture and be a part of the ham chơi culture.

#### *4.1.4 A community of family, food culture, and resilience*

Besides all the fun spirit and negative stereotypes, the core of the Vietnamese culture, according to the online community, revolves around family, food culture, and resilience. Despite all the generational differences and misunderstandings, the Vietnamese younger generations understand the struggles of the older generations. Therefore, they always must remember their roots, culture, and language, which are built from their family education, and the perseverance of their community. Several touching moments of families were also captured in the videos. In one video, two Vietnamese youngsters went to Vietnam to meet their grandmother and relatives. The overwhelming happiness of the grandmother could be felt throughout the video. Especially food is seen as the way Vietnamese parents show love, the image of homecooked meals is enough to show the beauty of the Vietnamese community. Surprisingly, in several comments, people mentioned that despite all the hard words they heard from their parents, and all the punishments they received, they understand those come

from the love and care of Vietnamese parents. They even feel grateful because now they are strong and independent thanks to their strict parents.

From the content of @phodaculture, food is placed at the center uniting all Vietnamese from every corner of the world. Food is the love of Vietnamese and also how Vietnamese people care about other people. Sharing food is sharing love. In one of the videos, a black man showed a video collected from the CCTV (closed-circuit television) of his house. In the clip, his Vietnamese neighbor came to share with him a bowl of Fish Rice Noodle soup. The Black man continued to show gratitude to the Vietnamese neighbor and shared the memories that they had together. Under this video, several people explained the meaning of sharing foods in Vietnamese culture, for example:

*“It’s deeper than just food. But with food, it takes a village to create a beautiful community....”*

Dividing the community by food battle is also how the online community unites. As mentioned in the previous section, the battle of Phở or Bún Bò Huế, for example, is the common way of uniting the community by food. The key here is finding a battle between two famous types of food/habits of eating, whose number of supports must be balanced. Instead of deciding which one is the winner, the results of these battles tend to be the pride in Vietnamese culinary or Vietnamese distinct cultures. However, the authenticity of food and food making is not that important in the online community. Even when pointing out the inauthenticity of the foods in the posts, commenters still showed their love for Vietnamese foods and their appreciation for sharing culture and “love”.

Besides that, according to them, the Vietnamese diaspora is a community of resilience. In several posts, people shared the difficulty of living in a new country as a Vietnamese immigrant. In one of the videos, a Vietnamese American man cooked a supposedly



Vietnamese comfort food while telling the story of how he struggled to find his own identity during his childhood and adolescence. According to him, as a second-generation Vietnamese migrant, he was taught to work hard and to put his head down to fit in. However, no matter how hard he tried to push away his heritage, he never felt truly himself. That was only when he started to learn more about his culture and uplift it by creating social media content about the culture, that he started to be proud of the culture and his Vietnamese identity. In the comment sections of several posts, people also shared that despite the tough education from Vietnamese parents, they understand and appreciate that kind of discipline now. According to them, the harsh love of Vietnamese parents helped them keep their cultural identities and the identity of an ethnic community in the new countries.

If the online community uses negative stereotypes to create shared understandings and collective memories among members, the posts about family, food, and resilience of the Vietnamese culture are to make the members take pride in their identities. This pride is particularly constructed in the relationship with the host society and other communities. Research into Vietnamese diasporic communities has shown that they tend to be seen as an “invisible” community despite their massive population in, for example, the US (Zhou & Bankston, 2000). Despite their historical settlement in the host countries, because of the invisibility of the community, members tend to experience exclusion and otherness. On the other side, the pressure of “fitting in” by the community and also from their parents could create misunderstanding and cultural dissonance between generations of migrant groups (Zhou & Bankston, 2000). The exclusion from the mainstream culture and the misunderstanding and pushing away in the community could prevent the young immigrant from accepting their ethnic or diasporic identities. They could develop a sense of stigma and embarrassment towards their own heritage culture. However, understanding, embracing, or

even uplifting their own culture could further help them identify with their cultural heritage and find a sense of belonging.

To the Vietnamese diaspora community, Vietnamese immigrants have been silenced in many aspects. Their community is invisible; different migrating narratives have been silenced by the popularity of the refugee narrative and the stereotypes of Vietnamese gang culture.

Therefore, the Vietnamese younger generation had difficulty defining their own identities and finding belonging. The online community has been formulated to fill in the lack of a sense of belonging. By valuing certain proud features of the community, which are a family-oriented mindset, a tasty and diverse food culture, and a community rebuilding from the debris of war and division, the members could understand the values of their community and be proud of their identity.

At the same time, the pride in the Vietnamese culture also helped the young generations associate and connect with the Vietnamese culture. “Remembering where you are from” is the essence of Vietnamese culture. Knowing their own culture, and remembering one’s roots and ancestors are important aspects of the Vietnamese culture. By showing their knowledge about food, family, and resilience, representing the essential beauty of the Vietnamese culture, and being proud of the culture, the young generations could prove to the older generations and anyone else that, despite their American upbringing and behaviors, they are Vietnamese in and out.

#### *4.1.5 Conclusion*

In conclusion, the online community shows the ambivalent relationship of the Vietnamese younger generations to the Vietnamese culture. While adapting to the mainstream culture of the host societies, Vietnamese immigrant kids could not comprehend a multitude of things about their parents and their community. From the tough education, and physical punishment to the smallest things such as gossiping, getting drunk, and having karaoke in any situation,

the Vietnamese young generations see things associated with Vietnamese culture as something unique, strange, and fascinating. All of these made them feel difficult when growing up as a Vietnamese kid, so, the online community now mocks these peculiar things of the Vietnamese community to share relatable, nostalgic, and humorous sentiments. Besides that, there were a lot of negative views about the community, which made them associated with certain “underground” cultures in the new societies. Now, they embrace these stereotypes to reinterpret them and look at them in a more light-hearted and understanding way. However, the online community understands that the key to the Vietnamese culture is around family, food, and the determination to succeed and thrive in any situation. These identifications of the community are to help them distinguish a Vietnamese identity in the host country, while at the same time, helping them make connections with other Vietnamese older generations in the local community and also with Vietnamese people from Vietnam.

The community does not try to claim authenticity but attempts to welcome and include anyone into the community even if they are not Vietnamese. Looking into the community, the culture of their parents and grandparents’ homeland is not essential to maintaining a Vietnamese cultural identity. Although Vietnam is still mentioned and presented in the community, it only appears through the eyes of the immigrant kids with all the peculiarity, amazing development, good foods, traveling, karaoke, and partying culture.

#### 4.2 The focus group

Focus groups are usually considered the most helpful method for understanding community perceptions (Simich et al., 2009). Four focus group interviews were conducted to investigate further *the social media behaviors of the young generation of the Vietnamese diaspora*, as well as *their perception of Vietnamese identity and how they construct an authentic Vietnamese experience through consuming social media content together*. The main goal of the focus groups is to investigate the audience's reception of Vietnamese representation in the

content of @phodaculture (Tran, 2017). When reacting to the social media content together, they were also prompted with several questions about their interpretations of the media content and their perceptions of Vietnamese identity. Participants were also encouraged to interact to give explanations or comments about the answers of the other person in the focus group.

Throughout three focus groups and one interview, the main discussions between participants mostly took place in the second part when they watched and reacted to the social media content together. Their reception of the social media content varied greatly between different focus groups, which ranged from seeing this content as negative and unacceptable to a relatable and humorous reception. These differences in reactions showed the cultural meanings and politics of representing Vietnamese identities (Tran, 2017). Moreover, the responses from participants also highlighted two differences here: the difference between online and offline interactions and the difference between the dominant and local experiences. In the next part, I will go through each of the main topics of the focus groups, and emerging patterns and themes from the second topic will be explained and justified.

#### *4.2.1 The social media behaviors of Vietnamese young immigrants*

Despite the differences in their cultural backgrounds, we see similar patterns in the social media behaviors of the young Vietnamese migrants and the second generation of the Vietnamese diaspora in the Netherlands. All of them sought out foreign content or content from members of the Vietnamese diaspora. In several focus groups, content from Vietnam was described as “boring” or “not interesting”. Thao from focus group 4 particularly mentioned why she does not watch cooking tutorials from Vietnamese people:

*“In terms of Vietnamese cuisine, I already know how to cook and I know that I am not the kind of person who follows instructions strictly, so that’s why I don’t need to watch them cooking”*

From the statement of Thao, a Vietnamese food manufacturing engineer, we can see that she positioned her authority in terms of Vietnamese cuisine. Therefore, the Vietnamese content is considered repetitive or unnecessary to her. Also, she distinguished the roles of media content by their origins. When consuming Vietnamese content, she considered them merely for their practicality. In contrast, when consuming content from foreigners and overseas Vietnamese, she enjoys both entertainment and knowledge:

*“Thao: It means that the Vietnamese people that I watch on social media are Vietnamese living abroad who talk about their overseas lives. It is like life in France, like life in Belgium, or life as an international student, or something like that. Otherwise, if the content is about food and cooking, I would go with content from foreigners, like cooking steak, and pasta or overseas Vietnamese cooking Vietnamese food.... That is because: Ok, I do not have that ingredient then what is the substitute, or how can I make it into a fusion...”*

Similarly, when being asked about their interactions with Vietnamese social media content recently, Van and Linh gave the reason for their social media habit and why their social media has almost no content from Vietnam:

*Van: Honestly, we are mostly following (content) about our interests. So it is closer to Japanese (culture), and it's less related to Vietnam. Or it is not... it's like.... Honestly, it is about games, films and it is also not really something trending....*

*Linh: Yes yes, we do not really react about... correct, correct....*

*Van: ... it is almost zero. It is just a niche that we share with each other....*

For Van and Linh, since they share similar interests in games, films, and Japanese culture, their social media subscription is mostly for these shared hobbies. Meanwhile, they clearly defined interactions with Vietnamese culture mostly relying on their interpersonal connections. Particularly, Van emphasized several times how her use of Facebook (as

Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Vietnam all the participants refer to their Facebook as the place where they interact with Vietnamese family and friends) completely relies on her interpersonal connections:

*“My friends, of course, at this age, no one uses Facebook anymore so I also just read (on Facebook).”*

*“Honestly, if you say it like that, the news that I see is most of the time through word-of-mouth, so I got it from my friends and my parents because I do not use Facebook that much either.”*

Gabriel, a Vietnamese student born in Vietnam, who lived in several countries during her childhood, mentioned how she stopped consuming Vietnamese content:

*“Gabriel: So I moved out of Vietnam when I was sixteen, so all the content that I still consume from Vietnam or like Vietnamese people are from 16 and before that.... So uhm you know that’s why I still have content from Vietnam I guess but it’s not the majority of it. The majority of it is from foreigners when I grew up and get more freedom to watch (what) I want or consume what I want.”*

If the group of Vietnamese international students stopped seeking out Vietnamese content after moving out of the country, the group of Vietnamese Dutch students used Facebook and Zalo (the equivalent platform for WhatsApp and Facebook in Vietnam) just to connect with their Vietnamese families. Lily, a 22-year-old Dutch Vietnamese girl, mentioned how she got more Vietnamese content on Facebook:

*“The only Vietnamese content that I get is... I think on Facebook because my family just post a lot of pictures, so I notice that I get like Vietnamese ad adverts?... as well... Because I get so much Vietnamese content and they sometimes post links and stuff like that, so that’s the only place that I get more like Vietnamese content.”*

As Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Vietnam as well as the place where all virtual social interactions take place, all participants immediately consider Facebook as the place where they interact with Vietnamese culture and also the place where they interact with friends and family members. However, in their own impressions, they all claimed that they do not spend a lot of time on Facebook, only Linh from Focus Group 1 mentioned that she actively follows Vietnamese news sources on Facebook:

*“For me on Facebook, I follow several news sources such as VTV and other pages...In general, I want to update information.”*

It seems that for this group of youngsters, as they moved out of the country, they did not feel it necessary to consume Vietnamese social media content. Interactions with Vietnamese society were reduced to family and friends relationships. These transnational interactions with families and friends are essential for them to keep a place of “home”. However, as they direct more to foreign content, they do not feel the significant influence of Facebook in their daily lives. They only keep the platform as a way of knowing what their families are doing and also updating about their lives for their families who are living in other parts of the world. In Vietnamese culture, doing and sharing things as one family is especially important. Therefore, the connections with families across the ocean are important for the sense of belonging of the Vietnamese participants.

The participants also reported their preferences for content from people from the Vietnamese diaspora. For example, Linh from focus group 1 mentioned that:

*“On Insta, I also follow lifestyles, [...] and also some influencers who are Vietnamese international students, for example in the Netherlands or Germany or anywhere else but mostly in Europe. Because I am curious about their lifestyles, ....”*

The tendency to follow people from the diaspora shows the need to update on the lives of people who are similar to them. As migrants usually have unique and isolated lives abroad, they often feel lonely and homesick when they do not see or interact with many people who are similar to them. Therefore, the broadcast of other international students who also live in the same place with them helps them to find a sense of familiarity and belonging. Thao from focus group 4 mentioned that she felt like having new knowledge watching the content from members of the Vietnamese diaspora. Even when watching the same type of content, she would actively look for content from foreigners or members of the diaspora. Again, as they moved out of the country, the life and situation in Vietnam were no longer applicable in the new countries where they are living now. In contrast, the situations of people from the diaspora have become more relevant and similar to them. Therefore, they choose to watch more content from people from the diaspora. The study by Van Eldik et al., (2019) found that following local Social Media influencers can help construct a local identity for young migrants. As they might feel a sense of pride or shared identity when seeing people living in the same or similar to them, that creates a sense of “us” for the young immigrants (Lalli, 1992)

John, a Vietnamese Dutch student, and Mai, a Vietnamese international student both mentioned that they consumed content about Vietnam from the perspective of foreigners. With John, as his Vietnamese capacity is not as good as natives, the content from Vietnam is too difficult for him to follow and he does not have Vietnamese friends from Vietnam who could explain to him. Therefore, he opted for content about Vietnam made by foreigners. As you can see, social media and technologies play the roles of connecting the young migrants with their heritage culture and the immigrants can adapt those for their own needs. For the young generations group, as they were brought up in a new country, the language barrier could be a challenge for them to connect with their heritage culture. Nevertheless, they can



find other ways to learn about their own culture such as consuming content through the perspectives of foreigners.

For Mai, since the contents from foreigners have double subtitles, they could share and watch with their partner. Living in a new country, immigrant starts building their own life and their family with native people. However, cultural barrier is such a powerful obstacle for them to develop long-term friends and relationships. Therefore, watching the content together through the lens of foreigners could make this process much easier. In this way, they can develop a stronger relationship with their partner without putting a lot of effort and time into learning and mastering a whole new language and culture. However, Vietnamese culture through the eyes of foreigners could be totally wrong and create misrepresentations. That is why Mai mentioned that they only watched this kind of content from certain people who, according to them, know the Vietnamese culture and could present the authenticity of Vietnamese experiences. Therefore, we can see that being Vietnamese citizens, Vietnamese international students pay attention to the authenticity of the content and they want to be careful when consuming content about Vietnamese culture from the perspective of foreigners.

As Yau et al., (2019) argued social media as a medium has different roles in the lives of temporary international students. Social media can help maintain the connections with home culture, while also helping the assimilation process and also integrating the two cultures. In the group of participants in our four focus groups, we also see similar patterns in their social media behaviors. In their accounts, although they do not feel the significance of Facebook and Zalo in their social media use, they still keep them as a space for getting in touch with their friends and families from Vietnam. In contrast, outside of the interpersonal connections, all of the participants explicitly mentioned actively seeking out foreign content and content from the diaspora members. As they are no longer living in Vietnam, the information and content from Vietnam seem to be less relevant to the lives of the young migrants. Therefore,

there is an emergence of the distinctions of Vietnamese content as something familiar and practical compared to something more exotic and entertaining foreign content. The content from foreigners is based on their interests but they are seen as closer to their surroundings and knowledge. Several of them particularly mentioned their content consumption from other international students and people from the diaspora. Since their surroundings have changed, they want to see someone with similar experiences, difficulties, and challenges. Living in a new country, and encountering unique experiences and challenges, the Vietnamese immigrants use social media to create a kind of transnational belonging through watching social media content from someone who is also living between two cultures.

For people who are the second generation of the Vietnamese diaspora, connecting with their heritage culture can go from two directions. First, they use social media to connect with their families from other parts of the world. In other words, transnational connections with the former homeland are reduced to family and friends connections. Facebook and Zalo are two social media platforms that they particularly consider as places for their Vietnamese families. Therefore, they are spaces where they find their Vietnamese identities and how they feel Vietnamese the most. Second, they seek out Vietnamese content, information, and knowledge through social media content. Learning about heritage culture is how the second generation finds their own identity and develops a sense of belonging. Therefore, learning their own culture through social media is a common practice among the second generation of immigrants. However, language barriers and the lack of direction for learning can be a challenge for them. To reduce the difficulty and close the gap, they can have different ways to solve the problem such as watching content from foreigners.

#### *4.2.2 Constructing a Vietnamese identity through consuming online content together.*

Three social media posts from the online community @phodaculture were chosen as the materials for all four focus groups where they had to watch, react, and interpret the meanings

of the three posts. Although these three posts could not cover all the perspectives, sentiments, and topics of hundreds of posts from @phodaculture, they contained three themes that were repeated a lot of times in the representation of Vietnamese identity in the online community: *Vietnamese foods, the harsh love of Vietnamese parents and body-shaming in Vietnamese family gatherings*. All the participants had time to watch and see the content by themselves before discussing what they understood in the posts with the other participants. Then, they were asked three questions concerning *their interpretations of the posts, the authenticity of the posts, and how they associate these posts with Vietnamese culture*.

Although the online community @phodaculture does not try to claim authenticity in their representation of Vietnamese culture, the discussion about authenticity is inevitable when decoding the cultural meanings in these online contents. Once they claim something “Vietnamese” in their posts, viewers automatically reflect on their experiences to measure the Vietnamese authenticity in the cultural expressions of these posts. In other words, the “Vietnamese authenticity” is still the reference for assessing the validity of the posts. However, “authenticity” is tricky (Banks, 2013). In most situations, we understand “authenticity” as a quality of things or a static pre-existing property that can be kept and measured stably in any situation. In fact, what is called a “Vietnamese authentic experience” is always changing and varying in the local context. As Banks (2013) argued, authenticity should be understood as a process instead of a quality. By recognizing the instrumental dimension of authenticity, we could assess the dynamics in negotiations of different groups in claiming ownership, authorship as well as the authority to decide if something is authentic at all. Looking into the intergroup interacting variations, we can see the complexity of constructing cultural meanings and the problematic aspects of authenticity.

In general, in different focus groups, there are quite different interpretations and reactions about the three posts as well as the acknowledgement of the authenticity of these posts. The

common pattern is that people from the same focus group have similar opinions about the three posts regardless of their different backgrounds. Focus group 3 was the only one in that people had different opinions, but one of them negotiated to find the shared points with the other person. Tables 3, 4, and 5 summarized the responses of all participants to three questions about their interpretation, the authenticity of the three social media posts, and the elements in the three posts that they can associate with Vietnamese culture.

*Table 3: The summary of the interpretation of participants about the 3 posts*

	<b>Focus Group 1</b>	<b>Focus Group 2</b>	<b>Focus Group 3</b>	<b>Focus Group 4</b>
Video 1	They recognized some foods in the video, but there are some types of foods that they heard about but never tried them before	This is more American-styled, and an exaggeration of Vietnamese culture	They are not sure about the foods in the video.	She recognized the “community mindset” in the video, but, according to her, the girl in the video does not know how to eat Vietnamese foods.
Post 2	They cannot relate to the post. The post does not represent	They find the post relatable and funny.	They find the post quite relatable based on their	She cannot understand the messages of the post. She thinks

	<p>Vietnamese culture and could create a negative impression of the culture.</p>		<p>personal experiences. But they agree that it is still not nice to hear these phrases. Gabriel found the posts outdated and</p>	<p>it is the negative side of the community and should not be shared publicly. She cannot relate to the post either.</p>
<p>Post 3</p>	<p>They understand and find it fun but cannot relate either.</p>	<p>They find this post relatable and funny as well.</p>	<p>recognized that the posts must come from the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation of Vietnamese immigrants.</p>	<p>She recognized the Vietnamese aspect in the post but she thinks it is too general to consider it as Vietnamese. Representing the Asian experience might be more correct.</p>

Table 4: The authenticity of the three posts

	<b>Focus Group 1</b>	<b>Focus Group 2</b>	<b>Focus Group 3</b>	<b>Focus Group 4</b>
Video 1	<p>The video is authentic in terms of the mindset of having Vietnamese foods, sharing foods and having big gatherings.</p> <p>The video is not authentic in terms of the excessive amount of food and having food from every region of Vietnam</p>	<p>Not authentic.</p> <p>Because it is too American, it is not authentic to them.</p>	<p>Not authentic.</p> <p>Because it feels like the experience of an immigrant kid, Lily thinks that it is not authentic.</p> <p>Gabriel also thinks this is also an American thing, so it is not authentic.</p>	<p>Not authentic.</p>
Post 2	<p>Not authentic.</p> <p>The post creates a wrong</p>	<p>Very authentic</p>	<p>Very authentic</p>	<p>Quite authentic but too general</p>

	perception of Vietnamese culture			
Post 3	Not authentic. Linh shared that she experienced body-shaming from her mother but this post exaggerated the experience.	Very authentic	Very authentic	Quite authentic but too general

*Table 5: The ways they associate or do not associate these posts with the Vietnamese culture*

	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4
Video 1	the kinds of food, the mindset of sharing foods and having big family gatherings	The American style made the post less authentic	N/A	She would not interpret these posts as Vietnamese content in other contexts. Since these posts are too general, they do not represent a
Post 2	N/A	The harsh love and white lies	The body-shaming and the joke of	
Post 3	N/A			

			Vietnamese parents	Vietnamese experience to her.
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Now, I will go through several patterns and themes derived from the answers of participants and the interactions between them to see how the Vietnamese representations were decoded in different social groups.

#### 4.2.2.1 Reacting aggressively to negative Vietnamese representations.

The largest differences in reactions between groups took place when participants reacted to the second and the third posts. Focus Groups 1 and 4, including only Vietnamese participants, not only had a difficult time understanding the messages, but they also had an aggressive and upsetting reception of these two posts. The first reactions from group 1 about the second post:

*Linh: What is this?*

*Van: Ah, what!? Uhm...*

*Linh: What is this?!*

*Van: It means... like those Viet Kieu from abroad, their parents always say: I picked you up from the trash....*

*Linh: Ahhhh...*

*Van: ...and "you are as dumb as dogs", "you are as fat as pigs" like that...*

*Linh: Ahhhh and then these are "sentences which can make you hurt".*

*Van: Ya...but they feel too Viet Kieu to me, I think that at least my parents will never ever say these sentences to me...*



*Linh: Correct....*

*Van: And my friends... I do not know anyone whose parents would say anything like this...*

When seeing the second post, they immediately associate these social media posts with Viet Kieu people (Viet Kieu means “overseas Vietnamese”) and keep their distance from the Vietnamese representation in this post. They denied their relations with any expressions in this post as they believed that these ways of expressions were ultimate insults that their parents would never do to them. They reacted aggressively to the posts and later asserted that this post was not authentic and that they could not relate to the post. They also believed that this kind of post could create a wrong perception of Vietnamese culture.

Similarly, in the one-on-one interview with Thao from focus group 4, she also had similar reactions as Thao and Van:

*Thao: Yes, I did not have any experience with this \*referring to the sentences in the second post\*. Uh, generally this second post is...*

*Interviewer: ... not clear?!*

*Thao: not very clear to me. Yes, because sometimes it also depends on the situation... for example, if a person who pays too much attention to their appearance is scolded like “fat as pig”, they might feel hurt, but if it was me, if anybody said that I am as fat as pigs, I would think that this person is so rude and has no manner, I would not feel hurt [...] but I never interact with anyone who says to me that I am dumb like a dog. To me, those people are just really vulgar...*

Thao even had more difficulty in understanding the jokes in the second post and she also associated these sentences with a group of vulgar people who are not in her close interactions.

Despite reacting aggressively to the sentences in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> posts, Thao did not deny the authenticity of them. According to her, the Vietnamese representations in these two posts are the negative sides of the Vietnamese culture, which she described as “caring too much about other people’s opinions” and “being judgemental”. However, she further clarified that these negative sides are “not intrinsically problematic” and if she had to think of negative aspects of the Vietnamese culture, she would think of something else. As a person who already moved abroad and had daily interactions with foreign cultures, Thao believed that this side of the Vietnamese culture is only problematic when we compare them with Western/foreign customs or manners:

*Thao: It means that if we do not compare (them) with foreign culture, and only living in Vietnam and only having Vietnamese friends, no foreign friends, then that \*body shaming\* is a normal thing, except for when you use insulting words.... For example, if we say like “Oh you seem to lose weight recently, you look much prettier!”, it is still a judgment about appearances but in a positive way. Or when you say: “Oh you seem to have had a good appetizer recently, you look a bit rounder.”, it is also a normal thing. Then you can answer: “Uh, yes, I really enjoyed food recently.”, or “Recently it is getting colder, so I eat more than normal” or something like that, it is very normal...*

The detailed explanation of Thao about the differences in ways of talking about weight between the Vietnamese culture and other cultures gave an insightful perspective about the three posts. It seems that the immigrant kids who are living between two cultures, have to frequently cope with the discrepancy in manners of the two cultures. These discrepancies can sometimes create “cultural dissonance” when normal interpretations in one culture could be interpreted as problematic in the other culture. The posts reflected exactly this kind of struggle of the Vietnamese young generations. They were taught and oriented in the manners

of mainstream society. Therefore, they all have a hard time understanding Vietnamese manners which are deemed problematic and unacceptable.

Surprisingly, reacting to the exact same posts, participants from focus groups 2 and 3 had more casual and relaxing reactions. When answering the questions about what they thought of the second and third posts, all four participants thought the posts were funny and relatable. In group 3, they specified that as they grew up listening to the sentences from the second post, they believed that these sentences are still not nice to say to kids. So, everyone should consider them as jokes between close family members and not take them too seriously. When they do not feel the problematic things in these two posts, they also acknowledge the authenticity of the Vietnamese representations in the two posts and point out the Vietnamese authenticity in these posts. The Vietnamese cultural representations were identified similarly in these two focus groups. In the second focus group, they identified them as the *harsh love* and *white lies* of Vietnamese parents, and in the third focus group, they saw the *body-shaming* and *the jokes of Vietnamese parents*.

All in all, we can conclude that when reacting to the negative representations of the Vietnamese culture, there are huge differences in responses from different focus groups. However, within the same focus group, participants share similar opinions, which show the negotiation attitudes in the social and public settings of the immigrants. The extreme reactions to the negative representations of Vietnamese culture particularly happened in groups of only Vietnamese participants who knew each other before the focus groups. The pattern that we can conclude is that in the setting where they share more common knowledge and experiences, they tend to express more polarizing opinions about the posts. Focus group 1 is the group that shared the most similarities, and their interactions made the second and third posts seem to be extremely negative representations of the Vietnamese community. At the same time, as they are two persons with the most knowledge and experience of living in

Vietnam, they could not accept any kind of generalization about Vietnam as funny or casual. Similarly, in group 4, Thao also expressed that these posts are negative sides of Vietnamese culture and she cannot agree or identify herself with the representation. These participants use the authority of Vietnamese citizens to define what is acceptable as the representatives of the Vietnamese culture. At the same time, as they attached themselves to the Vietnamese cultural and national identity, they could not accept themselves being associated with the negative side of the culture.

In contrast, in the focus groups with participants who are from different cultural backgrounds, the same posts could be seen casually as fun and relatable as well as authentic to the Vietnamese culture. Comparing this difference, we can see that cultural representations have different roles in different social contexts and different social groups. In a setting where there are many differences between participants, light-hearted social media content plays the role of linking the differences and bridging the different perspectives. However, when placing it in contexts where people consider themselves to have more knowledge of the culture, online social media posts become too generalized, exaggerated, or even completely wrong. So far, we have just gone through the reactions and interpretations from different focus groups, now we will go into more details of the authenticity of these social media posts.

#### 4.2.2.2 Authenticity on the spectrum of Vietnamese and immigrant experiences

The participants in the focus groups are not only different regarding the interpretations of the three social media posts, but all focus groups also have extremely opposite opinions about the authenticity of these social media posts. The authenticity discussion was unexpectedly important when participants discussed the first video featuring the images of a Vietnamese family gathering revolving around the representations of Vietnamese foods. As mentioned in the previous part concerning the online representation of the Vietnamese identity, food plays an important role in the culture and was used in the mediated form to recall memories and

formulate the pride of a minority group. In the focus group discussion, participants all automatically drew themselves to discuss the authenticity of the food culture represented in the video, and their opinions this time were similar to each other. Three out of four focus groups confirmed that the first video about Vietnamese food is not the Vietnamese authentic experience. The Focus Group 1 is the only one accepting certain aspects of the video as authentic but denying some other parts of the video. However, their varying reasons for the inauthenticity highlight the complexity of authentic Vietnamese food culture and the relationships between an “authentic Vietnamese experience” and a “Vietnamese immigrant experience”.

Food is an important aspect of Vietnamese culture. In several studies, scholars have used Vietnamese cuisine as the central to study the community-based and family-oriented aspects of Vietnamese communities (Truong, 1993; Kim Thuy, 2015). As Vietnamese people take their foods seriously, the ingredients, the methods of cooking, plating, eating, sharing and even communicating all play important roles in deciding the “authentic” identities and nation-states. However, as mentioned above, authenticity is not a quality but a process (Banks, 2013). In the following parts, I will show how participants categorize something as authentic based on the power dynamics and relationships between Vietnam and its diaspora.

Here is an excerpt from the second focus group:

*Interviewer: So do you feel that those posts, they represent Vietnamese... like authentic Vietnamese experiences? Like do you say that....?*

*John: \*unintelligible\* the second and third one. The first one's not really... Mai (overlapping): yes.*

*John: I don't feel so but maybe. Just the second and third ones, I would say more authentic compared to the first one.*

*Mai: Yes, I agree.*

*Interviewer: So the first one you don't think that they are authentic but the second and third ones you think oh you experienced that before?*

*John and Mai: Yea, for sure haha*

*Interviewer: And let's rethink about them, and let's say..... which part of the content that makes you feel this is authentic. Which.... You can uh like you can think about like small factors in terms of like food, why do you think they are not authentic.... Or even like the way maybe you can think about the way she represents it for example, do you think that is also one of the reasons why you think oh this not Vietnamese for me?*

*[....]*

*John: For me, the main factors are already..... you... I don't feel it authentic because as a Vietnamese person I don't relate and especially if..... Mai also doesn't relate well she is a real Vietnamese person and it's already like two opinions....*

*Mai: I mean, we're all real Vietnamese hahaha*

*John: Yeah oh yeah, of course we're all Vietnamese and in this case we express our opinions that that we don't feel like it very relatable already, cause it's very American-styled. We're both not Vietnamese American so that already makes it for me less authentic in a way, and the second and third ones yea we .... I think we just yea all feel it more closer.....closer by.*

*Mai: Yea, I totally agree... I I wouldn't say like it's not authentic because that that might be authentic for the Vietnamese American community. And I personally have not been in that community so I don't know for sure but at least I I would say that I cannot relate to the first video because I've never experienced it in my life that much food and like such a big you know gathering, because usually when there's a family gathering in my family like we cook*

*our own food you know we don't hire different caterers and like we just cook enough for everyone and not like super fancy out of the way you know professional chefs or what not. Like only recently that my family has been getting like caterers but it's only, it's also like very for very like.... I don't know a small style like we would only have like a normal family meal you know, like with five or six dishes and it's just only enough for the people who are coming and it's never extraneous or all-you-can-eat that type of thing. I would say I cannot relate. Authenticity I I wouldn't know, maybe some families in Vietnam they also do that thing because they can afford it and they do have a big family uhm or it's maybe authentic for the Vietnamese American but yea it's just.... Uhm the other two is is more... I feel like they're more authentic because yea we feel it in our bones literally like.... The... it's \*unintelligible\* ..... hahaha the questions yea we just experience it I would say on the day to day.*

As a Vietnamese second generation in the Netherlands, John did not discuss the elements in the video to categorize the authenticity of the video, but by referring to the opinion of his co-discussant, Mai who is a “real Vietnamese” to him. Here we could see a hierarchy of power in deciding what is Vietnamese or not. Mai, a Vietnamese international student living in the Netherlands for the last 8 years, is considered more knowledgeable of Vietnamese culture and has the authority to decide if something is authentic or not. He did not only use Mai's opinion as a parameter of authenticity, but he also relied on the “Americanness” of the video to decide if something was Vietnamese or not. Since he recognized the American style in the ways they organized the family gatherings, he immediately registered the video as not relatable and not authentic. As we can see, to John there is a clear distinction between Vietnamese people and Vietnamese immigrants, and between the Vietnamese culture and the Vietnamese-American culture. Moreover, the Vietnamese culture is the authentic one and Vietnamese people from Vietnam are the ones who can decide what is authentic or not.

Similar to the responses from John about the authenticity of the food culture in the video, Lily from Focus Group 3 also used the reference of Vietnamese-versus-immigrant to define the authenticity of the video.

*I: Yes, interesting. So, do you feel that they represent like a Vietnamese authentic experience....in those contents?*

*Lily: I think the first one with the food is not really uh.... That one feels like a like a uhh someone that has immigrant parents and just has like a family gathering or something like that....*

*Gabriel: Uhm yea I I don't really know about the food cause I.... from the.... I'm just guessing from the accent.... They're from America and.... Lily (overlapping): Yea.... They have a huge population of Vietnamese there but I wouldn't think that I would see that in the Netherlands you know. I'm not sure.... But for the memes... I I would say it's pretty universal. Maybe it's a bit.... Maybe it's a bit old but we all have experienced it one way or another right? So...*

Lily, a 22-year-old Vietnamese Dutch girl, got a bit confused when being asked about the authenticity of the social media posts. Although she recognized the Vietnamese foods in the video, she denied the authenticity of the post due to the “immigrant” aspect of the video. Although Lily herself has Vietnamese immigrant parents, she seems not to associate her past experiences with the Vietnamese family gathering in the video and keeps a distance from the Vietnamese immigrant culture in the video. Nevertheless, it is clear that to her, the “immigrant elements” in the video made it inauthentic. When Gabriel, a Vietnamese international student living in several countries in the last 10 years, clarified the Vietnamese-American style in the video, Lily immediately showed her approval of the argument. Here, we understand that the “immigrant” element that Lily referred to is particularly the Vietnamese American culture and not the Vietnamese culture in the Netherlands.



For the other participants, who spent most of their childhood in Vietnam, in terms of the authenticity of the first video, they also thought that the video was not authentic or just partially authentic. However, different from John and Lily, they all referred to their past experiences to decide if the Vietnamese representation in the video was authentic or not. Mai specifically pointed out the inauthentic elements in the video based on her past experiences with Vietnamese culture. According to her, in a Vietnamese family gathering, people must cook their own food and just cook enough for everyone, and the foods are not fancy and not “an all-you-can-eat type of thing”. As you can see from the two excerpts above, both Gabriel and Mai acknowledged the Vietnamese American style in the video. As they were aware of the other Vietnamese Dutch participant in the focus group who might be offended by their responses, they tried not to deny the Vietnamese American culture by emphasizing that they might just not be familiar with the culture and that’s why they do not see them authentic; but the Vietnamese representation in the video might be authentic to someone else.

Similarly to the responses of Mai and Gabriel, participants from focus groups 1 and 4 used their past experiences to categorize the authenticity of the video. As they are more knowledgeable in Vietnamese culture, the participants were aware of the diversity of Vietnamese culture from North to South. Therefore, they are more hesitant to say whether the food culture in the video is authentic. However, in the end, based on their experiences, they confirmed that the first video was not authentic to them or more exactly not what they experienced. According to them, what made the video authentically Vietnamese were the types of foods, the large amount of food in a family gathering, and the community building from sharing foods. And, what made the video inauthentic was again the excessive amount of food, the foods from all three regions of Vietnam, and the way they eat the foods. Especially, in terms of the amount of food, they mentioned that Vietnamese family gathering usually has a large amount of food but they should not be excessive or appear as show-off. The essential

aspect of Vietnamese food culture here lies in the spirit of eating, cooking, and sharing food together and should not be about how much fancy food you can offer. Food plays an important role in Vietnamese culture. Revolving around foods is community building and the food-sharing mindset between members of the same family or community. Therefore, the ways they cook and eat the food, the “right” amount of food, the number of people joining the party, and the regional foods in the family gathering all play a role in defining how authentic a Vietnamese family gathering is.

For the other two posts, the authenticity was related to whether they saw the negativity of the post or not. As analyzed from the previous part, some focus groups had serious reactions to the jokes in the social media post. In these groups, as they saw these posts as a negative representation of the Vietnamese culture, they immediately could not register these posts as authentic. On the other hand, since other focus groups saw these posts as more fun and relatable, they consequently found these posts authentic.

As Banks (2013) argued, authenticity is not something predetermined but always in flux. In the online environment, these social media posts were seen as Vietnamese experiences. However, when Vietnamese people reacted to them in in-person contexts, the representation of these online media content is problematic. From the responses of participants, we can see that the Vietnamese authentic experience is placed on the spectrum with Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American experiences at the very two ends. All of the participants, especially members of the second generation of the Vietnamese diaspora, refer to this spectrum to decide if something is Vietnamese authentic or not. Once they recognize the American style in the content, they immediately dismiss the content as not authentic. For the group of Vietnamese international students, as they know the diversity of Vietnamese culture as well as acknowledge the distinctive culture of the Vietnamese American diaspora, they are more considerate in affirming the authenticity of the online content. However, in the end, based on

their time living in Vietnam and past deep experiences with the culture, they insisted that the Vietnamese representation in the online content is not authentic to them. Last but not least, the authenticity of Vietnamese representation is also associated with the negative representation of the culture. In other words, as participants attach their identities to the Vietnamese culture, they do not want to be seen as associated with certain “bad” groups or “wrong” representations of the Vietnamese culture. Therefore, they do not see these “negative” jokes as authentic experiences of Vietnamese culture.

#### 4.2.2.3 The general representations in the online communities

When giving their opinions about the Vietnamese representations in these social media contents, several participants responded that these representations are too general, too Asian, or too outdated to be called Vietnamese representations. Particularly when discussing the second and the third posts, some of them mentioned that these posts are not wrong or not authentic in representing Vietnamese identities, but they are too general to be called a Vietnamese experience. Gabriel from Focus Group 3 mentioned that these kinds of jokes and posts are too outdated. She also emphasized that in Vietnam, we would not have these jokes anymore:

*Gabriel: Uhm I think it's pretty close.... To how the culture is but at the same time, so.... I think these accounts or like the posts are made by like second-gen Vietnamese...*

*Lily: Yea yea, they are more modern*

*Gabriel: Oh for me, it's more old.*

*Lily: Oh really?*

*Gabriel: Yea, like second-gen, so probably from a kid of an immigrant couple.*

*Lily: Ah yea yea...*

*Gabriel: Yea, so I guess the media that they consume from Vietnam is like probably from their parents or from their community outside of Vietnam, so to me it's a bit outdated in a sense.*

*Uhm like we wouldn't have that in Vietnam I would say....*

Here, there was a mismatching opinion between two participants of Focus Group 3. Lily, a second generation of the Vietnamese Dutch community interpreted the memes and the jokes about the Vietnamese parents as new and modern, whereas Gabriel who is closer to the Vietnamese culture in Vietnam interpreted these memes as old-fashioned and limited in the family context of an immigrant family. This gap in perspective reflects exactly the gaps in knowledge of two groups of youngsters in the Vietnamese diaspora. On the one hand, Vietnamese society is experiencing a fast-paced development with great changes every single day. Therefore, the kinds of jokes or Internet memes were also changed to catch up with that fast change. On the other hand, the experience of Vietnamese second-generation immigrants is usually limited in the contexts of family and diaspora community and those are usually considered backward in time. Therefore, their kinds of Vietnamese jokes tend to be a little slow in changing and developing in comparison with the fast changes in Vietnam.

Focus Groups 1 and 4 all mentioned that these representations might be associated with Asian experiences rather than Vietnamese experiences. From Focus Group 1:

*Linh: I do not want these kinds of posts and social media content to be shared and promoted widely because they might create a misunderstanding.... I would rather say that if they only associate them with Asian Mom, but here they specified the Vietnamese experiences....*

*Van: Yes, correct. I also think so....*

*Linh: That will make everything worse right, right, right?*

*Van: Yes....*

*Linh: (if that only referred to Asian Mom) They would think of maybe China or South Korea, but if they say this is Vietnamese....*

*Van: Then it would be no longer not Vietnamese. If it is associated with us (it would be problematic for us).*

*Linh: Hahahah*

From the discussion between the two participants in Focus Group 1, we can see that they immediately associated these posts with a general common Asian Mom joke. That consequently denies the representation of Vietnamese experiences in the posts. At the same time, they also clearly made a distinction between Vietnamese culture with the overarching Asian culture when it comes to negative representation. To Van and Linh, the satirical representation of the culture is accepted when it is not specified to any national identity. As their identity is attached to the national Vietnamese cultural experience, they would not accept any kind of negative representation of the culture being promoted and shared on a public space such as social media.

In Focus Group 4, when discussing both the negative and positive sides of the three posts, Thao also believed that these kinds of posts are too general to say they are Vietnam.

*Thao: Normally body-shaming is only in the conversations between people from similar age. For example, in the conversations between Vietnamese moms, they would say things like: Oh my children work at that company, earn this amount of salary or my children got this high grade. Those are even more common than body-shaming, so they are not very Vietnamese.*

*Interviewer: Not very Vietnamese?!*

*Thao: Yes, ... or in other countries, for example, in Chinese or Thai culture, they also body-shamed like a normal thing, so it is also not something...*

*Interviewer: So they are not unique to Vietnamese culture right?*

*Thao: It is not something idiosyncratic to Vietnamese culture. And about the first one, it is the Vietnamese family culture, a positive side of the Vietnamese culture. Honestly, it is the same, in Chinese culture, they also focus on family, and their community mindset might be even stronger than ours.*

When discussing the elements of these videos and posts, Thao gave the reasons why she thought that these posts were not authentic. According to her, these posts tried to highlight both negative and positive things about Vietnamese culture. However, these highlights are still too shallow and not really reflecting the “real” Vietnamese culture to her. As she recognized that food and sharing food are also common in Chinese culture. The body shaming and judgemental mindset in a community setting could also be found in Thai or Chinese communities. Therefore, Thao believed that these posts were not inauthentic but too general to be seen as Vietnamese experiences.

In a word, we could say that on the one hand, as these participants have wide, deep, intimate multidimensional relationships with the Vietnamese culture, the representation of Vietnamese culture in the online community appeared narrow, limited, and old-fashioned to them. The kinds of jokes and memes about Vietnam that they are familiar with tend to be other issues of the society, and they are also changed and updated fast. On the other hand, the second generations of the Vietnamese diaspora have limited exposure to the broader Vietnamese society. Their knowledge about the culture only comes from their parents, their families and their local diaspora communities. As mentioned in the discussion with Thao in Focus Group 4 (see the first theme Reacting aggressively to negative Vietnamese representations), their kinds of Vietnamese representation mostly revolve around the discrepancy between the “normal” mainstream culture of the host society and the “weird” and “problematic” culture of

their parents and Vietnamese communities. In conclusion, it is this mismatch in the reception of the social media content that explains the variations in the reactions of the participants.

#### *4.2.3 The perception of Vietnamese identity.*

In terms of the perceptions of the Vietnamese identity, another pattern was found in the responses of all participants. Regardless of their cultural backgrounds, all of them reported feeling more comfortable in a setting where there are more internationals, migrant kids, or biracial people. Since they feel excluded when being in a setting with only Vietnamese or Dutch people, they want to choose an environment where everyone speaks only English to each other. When being asked if she feels more comfortable with Dutch or Vietnamese culture, Van from Focus Group 1 mentioned that:

*Van: I think that, recently I also started doing an internship, and in my company, many people are half-Asian or half-European, then I relate to them more because their lives are also mixed and in-between. It is not like I completely sympathize with their experiences, but I sympathize with them in terms of not belonging to any specific culture...*

According to Van, it does not necessarily mean that they must look alike, and share similar cultural challenges and experiences, but the fact that they all need to face the feelings of being in-between two or more cultures makes her comfortable around them. John, a Vietnamese Dutch student even purposely chose an International program, so that he could use more English and connect more with international friends although he speaks Dutch fluently.

In terms of culture, all of the participants mentioned that there are certain things in the Dutch culture that they cannot understand, however, they do not find it difficult to understand the Dutch mindset. Besides, most of them mentioned that they do not feel difficult when living in the Netherlands although they don't speak Dutch, have no Dutch mindsets, or do not celebrate the culture (that also applies to the two Vietnamese Dutch participants). That could

point out that the nature of the Dutch culture is tolerable to other cultures and races. John from Focus Group 2 reasoned that since Dutch culture welcomes multiculturalism and individualism, it is not hard to live in the Netherlands. People focus on their business and they do not really care about other people's culture. However, participants also mentioned culture and language are the barriers for them to feel a part of the society. From Focus Group 1, Van and Linh mentioned that:

*Linh: Me too, although I did not live abroad in my childhood, but my mindset is also open-minded. But, even when I was younger living in Vietnam, I also consumed foreign culture, so.... In terms of mindset, I have no problem, but in terms of culture, yes....*

*Van: Like we have to relearn everything...*

*Interviewer: Do you mean there are something like...?*

*Linh: It is like the ways they talk, or certain manners that we need to pay attention to...*

*Interviewer: Do you mean certain trivial things, for example in daily interactions... for example, when we have to say sorry, when we have to say thank you...*

*Linh: Yes, correct..*

*Interviewer: They would feel like our Vietnamese culture is like... in certain situations, we do not need to say sorry but we say Sorry, then they would think like: Why do we need to say sorry right?*

*Linh: Yes, that's correct. That's one of them or some behaviors. Generally speaking, we need to learn those things, but mindset is not a problem at all.*

Just as Linh and Van mentioned, Dutch culture welcomes and treats people from different cultures fairly and inclusively. That is one of the reasons why all participants think that living in the Netherlands is beneficial to immigrants. Mai from Focus Group 2 and Gabriel from



Focus Group 3 all mentioned that the directness of the Dutch mindset is also something they respect and appreciate, especially if comparing the Dutch directness with the indirectness and “thousands” of unsaid rules of Vietnamese culture. Thanks to this aspect of the Dutch culture, participants think that even if they do not speak Dutch or know the Dutch culture, that will not hinder their career or future. Lily, a Vietnamese Dutch girl, was the only one mentioning the difficulty when living in the Netherlands as a kid of Vietnamese refugees. According to her, her parents came here as Vietnamese War refugees and they had nothing, so they worked hard and long hours. Therefore, she spent most of their childhood time with her sisters. Another time that she felt the difficulty was during the pandemic when the Anti-Asian sentiment was fervent in the Netherlands.

All the participants who are from Vietnam said that they still feel more Vietnamese than anything, but when living in the Netherlands they feel like “floating”. Mai called their identity “the global citizen identity” as they do not feel Dutch or Vietnamese, but just move from one setting to the next without having a clear identity themselves. Two Vietnamese Dutch participants mentioned different things. Lily mentioned that she felt both Dutch and Vietnamese but since she grew up in the Netherlands and her family quite adapted to the culture, she feels more Dutch most of the time. On the other hand, John said he did not feel belonged anywhere but depending on context, he changed his identity. In the Netherlands, he feels more Vietnamese, and in Vietnam, he feels more Dutch.

As we can see, the host country, the Netherlands where all participants are residing, have certain features that make the life of immigrants easier but also prevent them from feeling belong here. The open-minded mindset, the individualistic way of life, and a system of supporting multiculturalism made the Netherlands a suitable place for immigrants to live and build their lives without worrying about instability, challenges, or even discrimination. However, participants all reported that they do not feel belong here since they could not

speak the language or they could not get into the culture and ways of living in general. As you can see although participants could thrive in their careers, to feel belong to a new place or even a place where they were born into, understanding and practicing the culture are still important aspects for them to feel belong to. Therefore, they feel more belonging to groups of people who are also in between two or more cultures. They do not need to come from the same cultures or share commonalities. The in-betweenness and knowing that they also experience in-betweenness is what makes them feel belong.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

So far, there has not been much research focusing on the young generations of the Vietnamese diaspora. As the younger groups of the diaspora, their cultural and ethnic identity as well as their struggles and challenges have been concluded as distinguished from the older generations and the dominant ethnic communities in their regions, yet little research has been done to further clarify and investigate these distinctions. Therefore, this study utilized the emerging popularity of the Vietnamese ethnic online community (@phodaculture) to investigate the characteristics of the new novel identities of the younger groups of the Vietnamese diaspora.

To answer the overarching research question and the three sub-questions, the study employed a mixed-method research design combining content analysis with a focus on digital discourse analysis and focus group interviews to collect and analyze empirical data. After collecting and systematically analyzing 160 social media posts, and 188 comments, I would like to highlight the results of the analysis about the methods of constructing a Vietnamese ethnic identity as well as the types of identity that was represented in the online community. In terms of the methods of constructing the Vietnamese cultural identity, it was concluded that the online community focused on three aspects: *groups of people that the contents represent, methods of associating them with the Vietnamese culture, and the common topics mentioned*

*in the online community*. Within these aspects are different categories such as, in terms of groups of people that the online community represents, they are young immigrants who were born in the new country (1.5, second or later generations of the diaspora community) or half-Vietnamese people; regarding the methods of associating with the Vietnamese culture, there are categories of using foods and food-related pun words or making fun of Vietnamese parents (See Table 2 for the full list of categories for each aspect). These categories from different aspects are usually related to forming common patterns or common discourses about cultural identity. For example, young immigrants usually make fun of their parents to address the harsh love of Vietnamese parents; or, non-Vietnamese partners of Vietnamese people must also understand and endure the harsh love of Vietnamese parents if they want to be a part of the family. Since these methods are the strategic ways the community represents the Vietnamese cultural identity, therefore, they are essentially connected with the types of Vietnamese identity that they aim to represent.

After combining and synthesizing themes from these categories, three features of the Vietnamese cultural identities were concluded. They are *a community of unity and inclusiveness, embracing the negative stereotypes to have fun and heal the collective traumatic memories, and a community of family, food culture, and resilience*. These features of the identity are argued to show the ambivalent relationship between the younger generations of the Vietnamese diaspora and the Vietnamese culture (more specifically to their immigrant parents and the ethnic communities). First, as they witnessed the silence of different voices inside and outside the Vietnamese community (especially the community in the US but also in other regions) (Tran, 2017; Tran, 2019), they would like to construct an online Vietnamese community where inclusiveness and unity are encouraged and honored. Different sub-groups of the diaspora community such as the group of mixed-Vietnamese, the group of non-Vietnamese partners, and the group of young generations whose narratives tend

to be overlooked (Le, 2015) were also frequently mentioned and presented. Despite emphasizing the differences and diverse experiences, the community also focuses on the commonality among its members which is unity, determination, and perseverance to overcome the difficulties. At the same time, the online community also tries to be free from the ideology of the older generations and the ethnic community by “staying away” from political division, which has characterized the ethnic community in the mainstream culture of the host countries, and also divided the community as well as defined the relationships between Vietnam and some groups of the diaspora.

Second, the cultural identity of the young generations of the Vietnamese diaspora is also characterized by their traumatic childhood memories and negative stereotypes of the community. Presenting these negative sides of the community, the young generations would like to accept, embrace them, and at the same time laugh them off, reinterpret them, or simply share them with others to find collective sympathy. Previous research has concluded that the young generations of the Vietnamese diaspora tend to have struggled when “straddling two worlds” (Pham & Kraus, 2024; Zhou & Bankston, 2000). Vietnamese youngsters have to face the challenges of integration and assimilation into the host societies; meanwhile, the burden of keeping their ethnicity from their parents is sometimes enormous, which becomes an obstacle for them to connect with their heritage culture. The gaps and differences between the two cultures could sometimes create cultural dissonance between the Vietnamese young members and their parents. Orienting to the mainstream cultures, they tend to perceive the Vietnamese culture or Vietnamese ways of living as problematic, weird, or even unacceptable. Therefore, the strict education methods of their parents and the cultural practices of their communities are usually mocked and made fun of in the online interactions of the younger generations. By highlighting, sharing, and emphasizing these traumatic memories, the young generations want to find collective healing from other members who

also experienced the same challenges. Several negative stereotypes about their ethnic community such as gang culture are also embraced and reinterpreted in the online representation of the online community in order to give a new perspective to the ethnic community.

Lastly, the last aspect of the community is the beauty and the value of Vietnamese culture. This aspect is particularly aligned with traditional Vietnamese values, which are food cultures, a family-oriented mindset, and the resilience of a diasporic community. If the previous characteristics are negative and conflicting, this feature is particularly the pride of the online community about their Vietnamese identity. Vietnamese immigrants have been silenced in many aspects (Freidingerová & Nováková, 2021; Pham & Kraus, 2024; Zhou & Bankston, 2000). Their community is invisible; different migrating narratives have been silenced by the popularity of the refugee narrative and the stereotypes of Vietnamese gang culture (Lam, 2015; Tran, 2019; Zhou & Bankston, 2000). Therefore, the Vietnamese younger generation had difficulty defining their own identities and finding belonging. The online community has been formulated to fill in the lack of belonging. By valuing certain proud features of the community, which are a family-oriented mindset, a tasty and diverse food culture, and a community rebuilding from the debris of war and division, the members could understand the values of their community and be proud of their identity.

All in all, the findings of the content analysis confirmed the findings from previous studies. The struggles of the second generations in America and other parts of the world were also found in the representations of the online community (Freidingerová & Nováková, 2021; Pham & Kraus, 2024; Zhou & Bankston, 2000). However, the study also showed for the first time the representation of different sub-groups of people within the Vietnamese diaspora, which were never mentioned or paid attention to before. The result also shows the ideology of the young generations who would like to move forward from the political division and

focus on representing the diversity and inclusiveness of the community (Le, 2015; Nguyễn et al., 2023). The online community is, however, still based on the values of the ethnic community such as food culture, community, and the resilience of a community coming from dispersal, war, and division.

As mentioned earlier, immigrants have the need to feel belong especially when they are straddling two worlds. Immigrants from later generations develop a certain “third space” or “fourth space” to position themselves differently from the homeland, the host society and the local community. This fourth space showed certain definitions of “self” and “other” as immigrants do not aspire to associate with the local context that they are in. In the online interactions of the community, we found the Vietnamese later generations distanced themselves from the imposition of the older generations and the social controls of the local communities. For them, their parents’ expectations and experiences are something that they could not understand, and the ways of living of their Vietnamese parents appear to be odd, unique, and not American (or not Australian, Dutch or something else) enough. Throughout their childhood, they struggled to deal with different ways of education from Vietnamese parents and mainstream society. Therefore, online communities became the place where they construct a new hybrid ethnic identity and find people with similar experiences. Once they gather together, they can find belonging through together mocking and laughing off all the childhood traumas. Besides the need to heal traumatic memories, the second generation of Vietnamese immigrants also created this space to share the need for inclusiveness and love for their culture.

Despite the majority of “ideal” objectives and representations, the online community is still based on the culture of the Vietnamese American community, the perspectives of Vietnamese refugees fleeing the country, and the Southern Vietnamese people of the Republic of Vietnam. These representations are suggested to still evoke certain controversial discussions and

tensions within the online community. Since these incidents contribute an insignificant part in the sample of the study and more importantly they are not the focus of the study, I did not go deeper into investigating how the community deals with different opinions and perspectives. Moreover, I believe that this topic deserves its own research project with proper and appropriate research questions, designs, and investigation, therefore, it is left for future explorations.

Nevertheless, the study also used focus group interviews to collect and investigate the receptions and interpretations of the group of Vietnamese migrants in the Netherlands about the Vietnamese representation in the online community. To the best of my knowledge, this study is the first one attempting to report the differences between online and offline interactions as well as using social media content to understand the formation of cultural meanings in real-life contexts. From the results of the focus groups, it seems that the online community @phodaculture has still a number of challenges in achieving its goals of representing unified and inclusive cultural experiences. The interpretations and interactions of participants from focus groups suggest that people in different local contexts have different ways of interpreting their online content. The three patterns were noted from the reactions of participants: *reacting aggressively to negative Vietnamese representations, authenticity on the spectrum of Vietnamese and immigrant experiences and the general representations in the online communities.*

If the negative representation of the Vietnamese identity in the online community is to incite sympathy, and understanding from traumatic memories, the negative representations are perceived as wrong, inauthentic, vulgar and associated with “Viet Kieu” to some people in the focus group discussions. This perception especially takes place in the group of all recent first-generation Vietnamese migrants. This points to the fact that there is still a big gap in perception between later generations of the Vietnamese diaspora and members of the group of

recent migrants. As Thao from the focus group 4 pointed out these negative representations are only problematic when you compare them with foreign and Western standards, these online representations reflect exactly the struggles of Vietnamese migrant kids who are always struggling to straddle between two worlds. Therefore, as these contents are shared with people from the later generations of the Vietnamese diaspora, they are relevant to the group of later generations but could not be relatable to Vietnamese people who did not experience the struggle of balancing two cultures during their childhood. Moreover, since they could not see this content as humorous and fun, they immediately considered these posts as wrong, and insults and they cannot imagine being associated with the Vietnamese culture from this online community. In conclusion, the universal and unified experiences of the online community are still being questioned and challenged here.

The second theme that was noted from the interactions of participants was *the authenticity measured on the spectrum of Vietnamese and immigrant American experiences*. When discussing the food culture represented in the online community, most of them mentioned the “immigrant” and the “American style” as the reference for the authenticity of the online contents. Two Vietnamese Dutch participants particularly used this reference to define the authenticity of the online content. Once they recognized the Americanness in the video, the Vietnamese representation in the video was categorized as not authentic. At the same time, they also refer to the authenticity of Vietnamese culture as something decided by Vietnamese people from Vietnam. Here, there is a hierarchy of cultural capital and methods of obtaining cultural knowledge (Tran, 2017). For the people of the second – generation of the Vietnamese Dutch diaspora, there seems to be a spectrum of knowledge and cultural experiences of the Vietnamese authenticity, with Vietnamese and Vietnamese American cultures at the very end. To them, Mai, Gabriel, and other international students from Vietnam are still considered the



authority figures in defining Vietnamese traditional knowledge, at the same time, the Vietnamese American culture is the inauthentic one that they know of but cannot relate to. Most importantly, from the reactions of the Vietnamese Dutch participants, an unexpected complex relationship between different diaspora communities in the global network of the Vietnamese diaspora was noted. As the Vietnamese community in the Netherlands has never been reported and researched, this study is the first time that we could see the perspectives and relationships between members of the Dutch Vietnamese community and the homeland and also to other diaspora communities. However, when categorizing different associations of diaspora communities, the Vietnamese diaspora in the Netherlands has always been grouped with a group of “Western Countries” including the US, Canada, France, and Australia. Their composition of the diasporic community is suggested to mostly include “Vietnamese refugees” who fled the country after the Vietnamese War, and their culture is suggested to be closer to the Vietnamese American culture. The responses of participants in the focus groups seem to suggest their distinctions of the American culture as inauthentic and distancing themselves from the Vietnamese American culture. These unexpected findings suggest complicated relationships between different groups of diaspora in the global network of the Vietnamese diaspora. Especially it suggested dynamic attitudes and interactions between different sub-cultures and sub-communities even within the overarching “Western” culture that researchers have suggested about the relationships between Vietnam and its diaspora communities in the “West”.

The last pattern that was noted from the interactions of participants is *the general representations in the online communities*. Again, this pattern particularly took place in the group of participants who were all Vietnamese temporarily living outside the country. They tend to see these contents as Asian representations instead of Vietnamese, outdated or too general. The gaps in knowledge between the two groups are again demonstrated here. The

Vietnamese culture from Vietnamese is suggested to be broader, deeper, and more concerned with other social issues, while the Vietnamese cultural identity of Vietnamese migrants is limited in the context of family and community. Therefore, the Vietnamese representation of the Vietnamese second generation tends to be seen as more general, slow in development, and similar to some other Asian cultures. This knowledge gap was noted in the perceptions of the group of participants in the focus groups when they consumed online content from the online community.

To explain the differences and similarities between online reactions and offline reactions in this study, I can highlight three explanations here. First, in terms of similarities, we can see that in the groups of between-group interactions (focus groups 2 and 3), participants have more casual and relatable receptions of the online content. Therefore, we can conclude that cultural online representations have different roles in different social contexts and different social groups. In a setting where there are many differences between participants, light-hearted social media content plays the role of linking and bridging the different perspectives. Second, contrary to the first aspect, in a context where people consider themselves to have more knowledge of the culture, online social media posts become too generalized, exaggerated, or even completely wrong. Especially when they perceive them in person (in contrast to online interactions), they tend to attach the online representation to their “real” social, cultural, and ethnic identity, therefore, the representation of online content became too general that it could not be accepted or associated with. Third, the local context also affects how participants perceive the online representation and the identity formation of the Vietnamese diaspora members. This especially highlighted the challenge for the online community of @phodaculture. Despite their goals of representing inclusive and universal Vietnamese experiences, the local contexts of the diaspora community and the relationship

between diaspora communities still affect how their online representations are perceived and interpreted.

Last but not least, the study also looked at the ways people from the Netherlands perceive their identities and their social media behaviors regarding connections with Vietnam. The groups of participants from Vietnam feel more Vietnamese than any other identity. But when in the Netherlands, they do not feel Dutch in any aspect. The group of Vietnamese Dutch participants are reported not to feel belong anywhere in either Vietnam or the Netherlands. Depending on contexts and the social groups that they are in, they would adjust in order to feel the same as people around them. This finding suggested that the Netherlands culture supported immigrants and multiculturalism, but could not facilitate the sense of belonging to their immigrants despite how long they lived in the Netherlands. However, this part of the study did not help to answer the research question, it was not investigated further. The following study is suggested to look at different factors such as the political associations of the group of Vietnamese Dutch people, their connections with Vietnamese and other diaspora communities, or the formation of the local community to decide if these different factors influence the identification process of Vietnamese youngsters in the Netherlands.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

In conclusion, this study acknowledged and investigated, for the first time, the Vietnamese cultural and ethnic identity of young members of the Vietnamese diaspora. Despite their diverse backgrounds, the study reveals that through online communities they have attempted to build one Vietnamese experience with an emphasis on the inclusiveness and unity of the diasporic community. This online ethnic community is also argued to help the members share the common struggles, honor the differences of different sub-groups, show love and respect for Vietnamese culture, and most importantly formulate a space of belonging for its members. However, the results from the analysis of the focus groups indicated divergent receptions and

experiences of the group of young Vietnamese migrants and Dutch Vietnamese in the Netherlands when they consumed the content of the online community. Especially their aggressive reactions and distance from the Vietnamese representations of the online community show that there are still cultural gaps between the online culture (based in the Vietnamese American community) and the culture of the diasporic communities in other regions. Last but not least, the mixed-method approach of the study has provided a rich understanding of online ethnic and cultural representation from different perspectives. By investigating the perceptions of the target audience, the study showed the (in)significant role of the online community in the lives of the Vietnamese participants members. The findings of the study also suggested further investigation into a larger sample size and different groups of Vietnamese migrants to understand the dynamic interactions of different subgroups within the Vietnamese diaspora and their ways of forming a new “universal” Vietnamese identity.

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## APPENDIX A

### The three online contents for the focus group interaction

Video 1: [https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9vgo27SeXs/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9vgo27SeXs/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

Post 2:

[https://www.instagram.com/p/C8F5iTvyWwP/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==](https://www.instagram.com/p/C8F5iTvyWwP/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==)

Post 3:

[https://www.instagram.com/p/C8nzhmwte9S/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==](https://www.instagram.com/p/C8nzhmwte9S/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==)

## APPENDIX B

### Focus Group Interview Guidelines (English)

- Do you prefer to have this interview in English or Vietnamese?

#### 1. Welcome and introduction

Hello everyone, I am My Pham, a Research Master's student at Tilburg University. I am very pleased that you could join my focus group interview today, BTW that will be about the online engagement and cultural identity of the younger generation of the Vietnamese diaspora.

- Background

I believe that not every one of us is familiar with terms such as “diaspora”, “online engagement” or “online diasporic community. Therefore, I would like to explain to you all about these terms before we can move on to the main discussion.

So, diaspora refers to the group of people who are not located in the same physical regions but still share a religious, ethno-national, cultural, and national identity. And Vietnamese diaspora is an example of a diaspora community where people have spread worldwide but still share a cultural or ethnic Vietnamese identity. Within a diaspora community, it is common that there are several sub-groups of people such as people from the first or second generations of immigrants, people who left the countries a century ago but also people who just moved abroad more recently, and, of course, people who left the countries for different reasons. All of these groups of people with different backgrounds could identify themselves as Vietnamese and share a common public physical or virtual place.

In this study, I specifically focus on understanding the group of youngsters from the Vietnamese diaspora. The distinction between them and the other generation is that they

were born in the era of digitalization and they rely on online activities for social and networking activities. That means that different from the older generations who build ethnic and cultural ties through offline community events or annual ritual events, the younger generations rely on virtual ethnic communities to build connections with each other. I could say that this kind of ethnic online connection is new and different from the traditional ways, and they could transform how we understand the diaspora community in the future.

With that being said, you were selected because your profile indicates that you belong to this group of young immigrants. I would like to have input from your experiences as well as your opinions on your engagement with Vietnamese online ethnic communities. You might never know about these communities or you might be an active member interacting with these communities. That's all possible and all of your inputs are valuable to my research.

- Ground Rules

Before moving on to the main part, I would like to explain some ground rules of this focus group interview. This focus group will be recorded and you have the opportunity to ask questions at any moment during the recording. In this focus group, my role will be the moderator instead of being an interviewer giving you question one by one. I will ask the question and anyone can start the conversation, or leave comments on the answers from other people. Please remember that there is no wrong answer today, feel free to leave any comment and ask questions. However, I might push the conversation a lot faster or might interrupt you but it will only for us to finish the conversation on time and will not waste us too much time on maybe off-topic discussions.

Lastly, I believe that this is just an unnecessary reminder but please remember to be respectful to other participants. If you want to have comments or questions, you can raise your hands while waiting for the other person to finish talking.

- Opening question (5 minutes)

Now, let's start our conversation with a short introduction. Each one of you can introduce yourself, and anything about your background that you would like to share with us. You could say, for example, your name, age, what languages you speak, where you were born, your family members...

## 2. Transitioning questions: **Their social media behaviors: ( 15 minutes)**

- Which kinds of social media platforms do you use? Among them, which one do you use the most frequently?
- What practices do you usually do on social media? (chatting with friends, watching videos, reading news,.. )
- What kind of content do you find yourself paying attention to? Are they produced by Vietnamese or foreigners? Are they in English, Vietnamese, or other languages? Are they related to Vietnam, the Netherlands, or any specific regions?
- Is there any reason why you consume those particular contents? Can you tell me more?

## 3. Key Questions: ( 20 – 30 minutes)

- Now I will show you three 3 social media content from @phodaculture, can you describe your thoughts on these three posts in 5 words? Can you explain why you chose these 5 words?
- Do you feel that they represent Authentic Vietnamese experiences? Do you feel related to the content?

- Which parts of the content would make you feel “this is authentic Vietnamese”? Can you point it out?
  - Would you interact with these contents: like, share, comment? Would you talk about it with your friends or family?
4. Ending questions: **Their identity and perception of Vietnamese identity** ( 10 – 15 minutes)
- In terms of mindsets, cultures, and behaviors, do you feel different or the same as other people where you live?
  - Which part do you feel more, Vietnamese, Dutch, somewhere in-between, or a balance of all? ( Asking this question to only Viet Kieu people, do you wish to know more about Vietnam or visit Vietnam one day?)
  - When do you feel more Vietnamese and when do you feel more Dutch?
  - Have you ever experienced any obstacle or difficulty integrating into Dutch/ other society? If yes, can you describe one of the incidents when you found it difficult to integrate into Dutch society?
  - If someone asks you where you are from, how do you answer that?
  - Of all the things that we talked about today, what to you is the most important and memorable?