

Women Watching Television: The Influence of Thai Soap Operas on Lao Women Viewers

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Abstract

This study investigates how Lao women use and negotiate the storylines and female characters in Thai soap operas to construct a sign of agency and identity in order to enhance modern lifestyles and relationships and how local cultural policy-making is reacting to citizen's trans-border media consumption. Questionnaires, TV diaries, focus group discussions and interviews were used to collect data in three regional areas of Laos: Vientiane, Houayxay and Bolikhamsai, where Thai television soap operas are undergoing a revival of popularity. This study identifies three key themes to explain Lao women's agency, identity, self-satisfaction and social aspiration through the lens of their Thai television soap operas viewing. Firstly, brand name products and fashion in the soap operas provide a rich insight into the lives of Lao women. The relationship between what Lao women wear in their daily lives and what is acceptable by political authorities for the preservation of traditional dress presents a very real cultural challenge for young women. Secondly, individualism and personal freedom have been transmitted through Thai TV soap storylines. This socio-cultural trend impacts on Lao women's shift in attitudes towards changes in family structures, romantic relationships, premarital sex, cohabitation, teenage pregnancy, and perceptions of LGBT people. Thirdly, changes in public and personal perceptions of feminine beauty are found to be associated with Lao women's desire for white-skin, body dissatisfactions, and use of cosmetic surgery. Data suggest that Lao women today have more agency, choices, freedom and well-being, the increased views on personal life and gender equality, but less supporting quality education and decent work. Drawing on audience studies, feminist approaches and developing the concept of individualisation and detraditionalisation, the thesis concludes that the effects of individualisation of Lao women as audiences increasing their liberated life and relationship choices, yet at the same time maintaining traditions and social norms.

Keywords: Transnational TV soap operas, audience, television viewing, identity, agency, individualisation, feminism, culture policy

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction: situating the research

This thesis explores the extent to which women viewers in Laos are influenced by the storylines and lifestyles presented in Thai soap operas, in terms of their agency and identity. My interest in pursuing this study comes from my own experience of working as a media planning executive, a TV script writer and a radio anchor in Thailand. While undertaking these activities, I developed a curiosity about the influence of Thai television on transnational audiences, particularly in terms of identity construction and agency amongst Lao women viewers. I became intrigued with the ways in which women are represented in soap operas and changes in the behaviour of female protagonists as independent women.

I had noticed that many young Laotians liked travelling, shopping, studying and working in Thailand. As a researcher travelling to Vientiane, the capital city of Laos¹, I noticed that Laotians frequently watch Thai television, listen to Thai songs, read Thai magazines, and consume Thai products as part of their everyday lives. They also debate the meanings of TV programmes, and gossip about Thai celebrities. On the other hand, I saw a billboard in front of the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism encouraging Lao people to maintain their culture as a fundamental aspect of their national identity. The increasing globalisation in Laos (Rehbein, 2007, 2011) seems to reinforce these casual and anecdotal observations and the potential conflict between the maintenance of tradition in the face of citizen interest in the new.

The topic of this thesis is therefore a response to this initial curiosity, exploring how the consumption of Thai television soap operas by Lao women impacts on their attitudes and practices, particularly in terms of identity and agency and in relation to changes in conventions and cultures that potentially weaken the traditional values of the ‘virtuous woman’. This work also explores how cultural policy-making by the Lao government is attempting to deal with the influence of Thai and/or Western values permeating citizens’ lifestyles through their daily consumption of Thai television, particularly soap operas.

¹ Laos, officially the Lao’s People Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), is a socialist and a landlocked country in Southeast Asia, and shares a 1,835 km border with Thailand to the west. Asia Pacific Parliamentary Forum. Government of Laos. Available at: <http://www.na.gov.la/appf17/geography.html>

It is important to note that the Lao government heavily controls Lao television and all media channels to prevent criticisms of its actions (Human Rights Reports, 2012). Lao national television is a monopoly and a crucial organ of the state in terms of increasing nationalism: it is used as a bureaucratised apparatus to broadcast educational content and information about the country's leader, the National People's Assembly and Lao culture.² In contrast to Lao television, Thailand's televisual outputs are varied and include informative and entertainment programmes that are designed to attract a national audience but are not usually intended for audiences in other countries. As a result, the relative openness and 'otherness' of Thai television has become attractive to Lao people (Pholsena, 2006). Evans (1998) stated that "Most Lao people watch Thai television, which clearly has had a very important impact on young people, but the complex nature of this influence remains to be investigated" (p. 21). Despite the intentions of Thai television producers, viewers in neighbouring countries such as Laos, Cambodia, and among the Shan communities in Myanmar have access directly to Thai TV from satellite signals (Jirattikorn, 2008). In this way, TV messages have become acts of cross-cultural communication.

Laos has been under authoritarian rule since 1975, and as a result there have been very few opportunities to research Lao society, in particular to undertake empirical research that is theoretically informed.³ This means the societal transitions such as the agency and identity of Lao women, who are traditionally regarded as protectors of familial property and national pride in present-day Laos⁴, have not been investigated. Since 1986 Lao society has transformed its economy from market socialism to a form of capitalism in the wake of globalisation (Menon and Warr, 2013). This growth of the market economy has had an impact on social structure and cultures (Stuart-Fox, 1986; Evans, 1998; Ku, 2016). Some of the results of the socio-cultural changes are observable in terms of shifts in the economic culture of Laos (Rehbein, 2005), while, more widely, the nation's economic development has led to research on the environment, agricultural production, land regulations, and economic policy (eg. Rigg, 2005; Castella *et al.*, 2013; Yokoyama, 2014; Vongvisouk *et al.*, 2016).

² Lao national television began broadcasting on 1 December 1987, and then only two programmes a week in black and white. It could not compete with the variety offered by Thai television and still badly trails it (BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, Fareast).

³ The Lao historical development record reports that Laos become an independent nation state in 1953 under French colonial rule. The highest socialist state power took power in 1975. Ten years later, economic reforms pushed the country more towards a market-style economy, albeit one heavily controlled by the Lao Unitary Marxist-Leninist one-party socialist republic (Evans, 1998). However, the fact that it is a one-party state means that there are still severe limitations on democratic politics (Rehbein, 2016).

⁴ True power of Lao women [online] Teerapat Charuensuk, *Matichon* (22 July 2015). Available at: <http://m.matichon.co.th/readnews.php?newsid=1437538094>.

Following the end of the socialist economy, development has become the government's national focus. Although Laos has gradually been integrating itself into global economic institutions (participating, for example, since 1997 in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations - ASEAN), its economy is still not as open when compared to other countries in Southeast Asia, where the ethos of capitalist exchange and concomitant consumer culture is much more deeply inscribed into society. As a result, Laos is still struggling with the harsh effects of slow economic integration into the world market and it is important to realise that the country remains very dependent on foreign assistance (Bounkhong, 2002; St John, 2006; Reilly, 2012; Asian Development Outlook, 2017).

One of the reasons that economic integration has been slow and haphazard is that the government is fearful of the impact that economic openness may have on the cultural and political life of the country. The Lao government's policies controlling traditional cultures and national identities were launched in 1999 to subvert cultural incursions regarded by government as contaminated by Western values and ideologies deemed contrary to the traditional cultures and values, particularly of the role and place of women in society. As Pholsena (2006) argues, a nation-state can impose a strict agenda and various types of control mechanisms in order to mitigate the impact of cross-border communication from neighbouring countries. On 14 October, 1999, the Ministry of Information and Culture of Laos issued Notice No. 848 in an attempt to mitigate cultural erosion as a result of external influences. From this perspective, nation and culture are inseparable entities: there is no nation without its culture, and culture cannot exist without a nation. Xayxana (2005) also suggests that culture and nationalism, as ideologies, are emphasised and widely disseminated through Lao media and through Laotians' lifestyles, especially with Lao women depicted by the state as enthusiastic, economical, and pillars of the family dedicated to their husbands and children. This government statement embodies the fear that the country's strategies have of cultural subversion:

Culture, tradition and nation are inseparable elements. If the nation happens to be lost, culture would be affected and on the verge of destruction. The ruin of the nation is the death of the culture. If the culture is swallowed up, the nation will no doubt lose her identity. (Xayxana, 2005, p. 36)

The implementation of the 8th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSED) 2016-2020 represents the fulcrum of the Lao government's development initiative to eradicate poverty and provide a prosperous future for its citizens (UNDP in Lao PDR, 2017). Capitalist

development entails a process whereby a feudal or aristocratic system of government is replaced by a new bourgeoisie, an enterprising, urban middle class that engages in trade, banking, industry, and innovation (Kuan-Hsing and Huat, 2007). An example of this in the context of Laos is the large growth of trade in 2007 prompted by Chinese investment valued at 496.06 million US dollars.⁵ Moreover, Laos has reformed the economy through developing its links with non-communist Southeast Asian countries including Thailand, which has long been a trade hub for Laos (Ku, 2016). Both China and Thailand, which share a land border with Laos, are significantly enabling the acceleration of economic growth, social progress and improved production, transportation, health and communication in Laos.⁶ With these economic changes come changes in other aspects of life, including the media.

As Thailand and Laos's economic relationship strengthens, there are also overlaps in the patterns of media consumption of the two countries. Throughout its history, Thai television has been very popular among Laotians. Dr Linda Reinik-Smith, a geologist in the United Nations who lived in Laos from 1992 to 1996, discussed the television watching habits of Laotians, stating in Utamachant's (2001) research that the majority of Lao people watch Thai television programmes on a daily basis: "Thai television has a lot of influence on Lao people. The American people will turn on the TV while working with others. But in Laos, the people sit in front of the TV and watched solemnly. Some families watch TV with dozens of other people. All television programs seem to affect the Lao people" (p. 75).

As Laotians (75 per cent) watch, and are influenced by Thai television as part of their daily lives (Utamachant, 2001), the "Lao Women's Union has criticised Thai programmes for encouraging incorrect dress and manners, at the expense of Lao traditional clothing such as the *sinh*, the Lao sarong" (Pholsena, 2006, p. 53). Similarly, a Lao journalist interviewed in Vientiane in March 2002 (cited in Pholsena, 2006) tends to be critical of the current media situation in Laos. For example, young Laotians follow their Thai counterparts, "because they do not have any idols in the country" (p. 53). Thai actresses have become popular and influential in Laos in terms of marketing and PR promoting their own businesses⁷. These statements indicate that this transnational media consumption has become an arena of conflict in the Laos-

⁵ Bank of Thailand (2008) 'Lao economy'. Available at: https://www.bot.or.th/Thai/MonetaryPolicy/EconMakhongCanelArea/Laos/Doclib_Report_Laos/econ_laos_48.pdf

⁶ Bangkok Post (February 2015). Thai-Lao deal to spur trade [online], Available at: <http://www.bangkokpost.com/business/news/467852/thai-lao-deal-to-spur-trade>.

⁷ A whole bunch of Lao people and a Thai superstar, Aum Patcharapa [online], Thairath (7 June 2017). Available at: <https://www.thairath.co.th/content/965843>

Thailand relationship and is seen by some, including the government, as undermining the efforts of the Lao nation state to encourage the maintenance of traditional culture.

Contemporary mass media is in an unprecedented position to impact on national identity, particularly when considered as an aspect of deepening and widening globalisation (Smith, 2003; Gelisli, 2014). The work of Praphanturakit (2008), for example, examined the construction of Lao identity in the Thai film *Lucky Loser* (19 October, 2006) in relation to media production, text and consumption. The study suggests that Thais depict Laotians as losers and fools, members of an underdeveloped country that depends on Thailand in terms of economy and knowledge, and as marginal citizens of the global community. These views, which originate from and circulate within Thai culture, assume that Thais are superior to the people of Laos. Praphanturakit's findings can be summarised as: (i) the Laos sampling groups, consisting of government officers in Vientiane, the capital city and the centre of state power, negotiate or oppose the meanings of 'Lao-ness' as constructed by the Thai film producers; (ii) working-class Laotians working in Thailand who are located at more of a distance from the state power agree with the film representation of Lao-ness as inferior.

The Thai soap opera *Love Song on Sides of the Mekong* (February-May, 2007) aims to reconcile the people on both sides of this international divide by presenting the love story of a Lao woman and a Thai man. However, a much-edited version of the television programme is broadcast, in which the original storyline is changed so that the woman is not Laotian after all but from the north-east of Thailand instead. This change was prompted by the Laos Embassy and the Consulate in Thailand because they claimed that some scenes may cause problems in terms of traditional Lao culture and Lao femininity. In this case, Thai TV soap operas have trespassed into Laos as the regional media dominates a neighbouring country, as well as being exported to Myanmar, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China (Siriyuvasak, 2010; Tu Anh, 2015).

The saturation of news and information from digital media, enabled by progress in the development of the internet, has led to Laotians in the capital city and tourist areas of the country to establish more active social lives (Uimonen, 2003). This new network of global interaction is an important means which enables Laotians to access what are perceived to be more interesting, exciting and appealing lives. Nonetheless, Uimonen argues that the Lao government is not comfortable with the international media, in particular that accessible via the Internet, since there is a "notion of [the internet as] a free flow of information running contrary

to the state's centralised control of information" (2003, p. 278). On this point, Laotians (75 per cent) are very likely to watch Thai TV because of the ease and low cost of accessing it through satellite. For satellite TV availability, this study examines how Lao women⁸ (ແມ່ຍິງລາວ in Lao) of varying socio-economic status, careers, and educational backgrounds, as cross-border audiences negotiate particular values or images presented in Thai TV soap operas in constructing their own identity and developing their agency, particularly in the post-1999 period, when the government launched regulations that aimed at cultural preservation.

Studies of the cultural influence of Thai television soaps on Lao women's identity and agency are rare. Furthermore, the influence of Thai television soap operas on Lao female viewers' senses of cultural identity, agency, self-satisfaction and social aspiration has not been given much attention, and yet is hotly contested. As Pholsena (2006) notes, "Worth nothing is a study published in 2000 by a Thai academic, Vipha Uttamachant, on the impact of Thai media on Lao society" (p. 73). It would seem that the Thai researcher does not have a real voice in media and cultural studies in Laos. On the other hand, the research here has found that the influence of Thai television viewing has become an important tool to allow Lao women as audiences to experience values external to their country. This study develops the term 'Thailandisation' to describe the process whereby non-Thai audiences enjoy a cross-cultural experience through their viewing of, in this case, Thai soaps. Such a term provides more precision than and acknowledges the difference between Eastern and Western influences on audiences in the East. Whilst Lao citizens are exposed to and consume media products from a range of countries, the consumption of popular media from a near Eastern neighbour such as Thailand provokes different responses to Western media because they are more relatable if not necessarily more attainable. The study also highlights this term's advantage as a conceptual tool to counteract the flaws associated with the term 'Westernisation' or Western-influenced socio-cultural transformations in Laos, since much of the influence is in fact from an 'Eastern' country.

1.1.1 Rationale for studying women audiences

I have chosen to focus on women and television for several reasons. Firstly, a significant amount of research has shown soap operas disseminate the values of capitalism and

⁸ The Lao Women Union reports that the government of Lao PDR has a policy to promote gender equality for greater development, targeting women's empowerment and gender equality in the public and private sectors, in particular poverty reduction. (Report 2017 Round Table Implementation Meeting, 22nd - 23rd November 2017, Champasak Province, Lao PDR)

consumerism to modern female viewers (Geraghty, 1991; Hobson, 2003; Iwabuchi, 2002; Spence, 2005; Chua and Iwabuchi, 2008), both in-country and through cross-cultural consumption. For example, young women in Pakistan desire the fashionable clothes of female characters in Turkish soaps, something seen as weakening Islamic cultural norms (Zafar *et al.*, 2017). Young women in China also imitate female characters' Western lifestyles as portrayed in Korean dramas (Yang, 2012). Conversely, women in Malaysia seek to acquire the cosmopolitan lifestyles and images of female beauty produced in Asian soap operas although they also manage to maintain local cultures and traditions, indicating that women as audience can resist the representations of 'vulgar' patterns of behaviours which contrast with their cultural and national conventions (Md Syed, 2013; Md Syde and Runnel, 2014).

Secondly, TV programmes perform a crucial role in shaping and *changing* women's behaviours, in particular their personal and family relationships. Research by Chen (2015) confirms, for instance, that young women in China who watch foreign TV programmes are likely to advocate the foreign values of cohabitation and individualistic relationships, ignoring traditional Confucian family values (Chen, 2015). TV dating programmes such as *Take Me Out* also invite young women in China to reject the conventional practices of gender relationships by depicting premarital sex, cohabitation, and extramarital affairs as less negative than was usually the case (Yang, 2017). Similarly, young women in northern India watching the soap opera the *sass-bahu* are stimulated to view more sceptically the traditional roles of women in society (Banaji, 2011).

Thirdly, some interesting effects have been noted in relation to changing attitudes towards sexuality when represented 'positively' in TV content. The representation of queer content is exemplified in the character of Piper Chapman (who is shown as straight in the first scene and then adopting a lesbian sexuality as the drama unfolds) in *Orange Is the New Black* (OITNB, 2013-2016) (Symes, 2017). Some studies suggest that the depiction of gay and lesbian characters in this TV series has contributed to a reduction in homophobic attitudes and feelings among American viewers (see, for example, Gillig *et al.*, 2017). The American TV sitcom *How I met your mother* had a similar effect in the case of abortion, with Swigger (2016) noting that the exposure to such storylines brings about female viewers' negative views towards abortion. Research about gender and sexuality is relevant in this study in relation to the positive reception of LGBT characters portrayed in Thai soaps.

Finally, the influence of reality TV shows on women's aspirations of beautification has been addressed in many studies (eg. Grabe *et al.*, 2008; Hardit and Hanum, 2012). American reality

TV programmes and competitions show an increase in women's concerns about their bodies and their desires to have a thinner body (English, 2014). Similarly, American TV series such as *Cougar Town* and *Desperate Housewives* portray female characters in their 40s with physical appearances more typical of much younger women (Hefner *et al.*, 2014). In the current study, Lao female viewers in both urban and rural areas and from different socio-economic backgrounds all negotiate, accept, and refuse to a greater or lesser extent, the soap messages in relation to consumerism, modern relationships and beauty ideals.

The great majority of studies undertaken on women and soap viewing have been within a Western context so this study fills an important gap in our understanding of affect by focusing on an explicitly Eastern environment. Thai TV soap opera as a genre has been the subject of a modest amount of academic study in terms of plot, character, and gender dimensions (e.g. Soontornviriyakul, 2008; Boonbunjung, 2011; Jirattikorn, 2016). Broad findings suggest that in terms of conventions and standards of narrative, they comprise traditional and contemporaneous forms; the representation of consumer culture through the dominant ideologies of capitalist values such as consumerism and moneyism is often juxtaposed with the opposing ideologies of traditional Thai cultural values such as localism and self-sufficiency in storylines (Soontornviriyakul, 2008). The role of women portrayed in the plotlines and characters of Thai soaps confirm both traditional feminine values and yet also project modern lifestyles at the same time. As Tantiranat (2009) argues, Thai female protagonists and plots still narrate the standards of what a good Thai woman - in her role as wife and mother in patriarchal society - should be. For example, even though female protagonists are often rich and make their own lifestyle choices in terms of, for example, pursuing a career and enjoying financial independence, they mostly do not engage in pre-marital sex and are involved in monogamous relationships (Nonlucha and Tularak, 2014). In addition, female leading characters must express gratitude to their parents and should be proficient at, and willing to do, cooking and housekeeping, as well as be patient in any situation (Sawasdechchai, 2011).

However, in more contemporary storylines, leading female protagonists portray a kind of fusion of traditional and modern lifestyles, indicating the hybridisation of culture. The concepts of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 2012), local resistance, and contra-flows (Thussu, 2007) are all important for enhancing an understanding of Lao circumstances in this research. Female protagonists act as kind, professional, independent women who are heavily influenced by consumerism (as seen in their desire for and purchase of luxury goods) (Buatoom, 2001). For example, they portray 'the modern woman' as beautiful, dressing in fashionable clothes and

using brand name products characterised by liberated lifestyles and financial comfort and independence (Atijitta, 2012). Nevertheless, this representation of female agency is portrayed as not always in line with traditional feminine virtues in Thai soap operas (see Nuchpitak, 2009; Mathet, 2010). For example, young women villains are attractive and glamorous yet also seductive, aggressive and vengeful, and often pay a heavy price for their independence by the end. In this sense, then, Lao women as audiences are presented with options for behaviour and relationships, negotiating and choosing to accept or reject aspects of traditional values and sexual norms.

Soap opera plots about family life often construct a role model of a good family. These storylines promote positive attitudes about traditional family values as, for example, in *Ban Nee Mee Rak* (Full house of love) (Thippayachan, 2010), *Heng Heng Heng* (Good and incredibly lucky) and *Bang Rak Soi Kao* (Love at alley no. 9) (Kampangpan, 2006). In addition, TV plots with LGBT characters are frequently presented in Thai TV soap operas and impact young audiences' attitudes towards sexual identity, for example, some studies show that Thai youth accept these minority sexual preferences and imitate the characters' hair styles and clothes (Ngarmwuthiworn, 2010).

The Lao government is concerned about the extent to which liberal, cosmopolitan lifestyles may be emulated in Laos, especially by women (who may be regarded as a cultural catalyst) in booming cities such as Vientiane. As a consequence of these fears, cultural policies to protect national and cultural traditions have been implemented (Pholsena, 2006). Lao government introduces the regulations to control Laotians' clothes; women are not allowed to wear trousers and skirts (Ministry of Information and Culture, Notice no. 848, 14 October, 1999).

1.2 Research questions

I suggest that the role of Thai television on Lao viewers' daily lifestyles is therefore important and worth investigating. It is also useful to acknowledge that the key focus of this study is to investigate the influence (if any) of watching Thai TV soap operas on Lao women's sense of identity, agency, self-satisfaction, and social aspirations. This study focuses only on women because in Laos, women are viewed as cultural catalyst and soap opera as a cultural product attract and attain female viewers (Spence, 2005; Ford, Kosnik and Harrington, 2011). TV soap operas are a dynamic form used by audiences (Ang, 1985, 1996) to understand notions of gender and sexuality as well as a variety of aspects of women's lives (Geraghty, 2006; Geraghty

and Weissmann, 2016), the research explores of the effect of Thai soap operas on the behaviour and attitudes of Lao women and their power as audiences in the interpretation of TV soap meanings.

The primary research question is: what pleasures do Lao women derive from watching Thai soap opera? Unpacking that research question, I address three sub-themes related to Lao female viewers for Thai soap opera:

- 1) How do viewers negotiate Thai soap content when storylines often contravene traditional Lao values and cultural traditions?
- 2) To what extent do viewers aspire to or reject the consumerism they see in programme content?
- 3) How (if at all) do viewers relate to storylines which portray ‘modern’ sexual behaviours, fashion, and lifestyles?

My secondary research questions is: how are the Lao government’s attitudes to the impact of Thai TV soap operas on Lao citizens in their everyday lives?

To answer these questions, the study employed a constructivist standpoint to examine the social reality experienced by Lao women audiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, 2011, 2018; Lincoln and Guba, 2013). Since the project’s epistemological positioning is subjectivist, within a constructivist paradigm, it employs a multi-method approach to answer the research questions. I used a mix of survey of Lao women’s daily transnational consumption of Thai television, TV diaries kept by viewers to record their daily TV soap operas watching and their reception of those programmes, and focus groups with women to evaluate their attitudes towards the messages of Thai TV soaps. These methods were applied as research tools in order to develop a holistic exploration of Lao women’s perceptions, agency and identity construction. In-depth interviews with Lao politicians as representatives of cultural policy-makers and a Lao academic were also conducted to provide insights into the cultural policies of the Lao government towards the incursion of non-Laos values during this period of economic reform and globalisation.

1.3 The theoretical framework and research argument

It is important to position the focus of this work within the larger literature on the topic and to consider the theoretical framework which underpins the approach and which draws on theories

of the audience through a feminist lens as well as more overarching theories around individualisation and detraditionisation, and cultural hybridity.

The aim of this research is to explore the pleasures of consuming Thai soap opera and the potential influence on women viewers' sense of self-identity including changing their ideas about 'appropriate' behaviours and lifestyles. From this perspective, audience studies are useful in exploring women's TV consumption and interpretation of televisual texts. This research draws on Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model (1980) to examine viewers' interpretations and understandings of TV messages through their acceptance, negotiation, or rejection of content. In addition, the "uses and gratifications" approach developed by Katz, Blumer and Gurevith (1974) had also been employed to explore Lao women viewers' patterns of soap viewing and the pleasures derived therefrom. In other work which has used this approach, Press (1991) stressed that working-class women usually agree with texts related to their personal lives, while Gillespie (1995) found that young viewers negotiate soap content about relationships. Educational attainment had also been seen as an important factor in influencing media effects and audiences' articulations of the meanings of soap operas (Espiritu, 2011). This research argues that portrayals of female empowerment shown in some Thai soap opera has encouraged viewers to have the confidence to make real change in their lives, so that the pleasures derived have not simply been in terms of entertainment but also in relation to improving their socio-economic position and autonomy.

The work also draws heavily on feminist media analyses (McRobbie, 1997, 2009; Gill, 2007) to examine the ways in which women's agency, individualisation, freedom and equality as represented in entertainment media and how women audiences understand and interpret those representations. McRobbie (1997) notes that while middle-class women can purchase commodities with enjoyment, showing their power and privilege, women suffering poverty, low-paid work, hardship, and oppression also desire consumer goods. She states that purchasing commodities and services provides the illusion of power and liberation in women's lives but that power resides at a symbolic level rather than materially in society. Therefore, class and social position have to be considered in any exploration of women's TV viewing and this work engages explicitly with issues of status amongst women viewers.

McRobbie (2009) further argues that contemporary women's consumption of media and popular culture is the "undoing of feminism" (p. 11). The representation by popular media of young women as free, liberated, and independent is contradicted by gendered inequality issue

in reality. Gill (2007) similarly argues that the popular entertainment media portrays and focuses on women's "individualism, choice and empowerment [with an] emphasis upon consumerism" (p. 147). For both these critics, the problem with the media is the perpetuation of the false idea that women are empowered to achieve whatever they want through their consuming behaviour, whereby the power to purchase as consumers is conflated with the power to be autonomous as citizens. Women thus use aspects of a 'post-feminist' lifestyles such as beauty, fashion, and adornment for the construction of the ideal self, while at the same time, women's anxieties regarding intimate relationships and experiences of sexism are common. This research takes the debate a step further by acknowledging the critique of 'post-feminist discourse' but also suggesting that in some circumstances, following Gillespie (2005), audiences may actually be empowered to make changes in their lives through exposure to examples of women's agency displayed in TV texts.

More generally, however, this study adopts a post-feminist critique in positing that the neoliberal economic order purports to empower women by encouraging them to assert their individuality through consumption, but such emancipation is hollow since there is no political substance to the 'choice' and 'freedom' neoliberal capitalism offers because it turns women into consumers rather than citizens. I argue that empowerment and autonomy through neoliberal consumption is not a 'true emancipation' of Lao women as it only replaces one system of oppression (patriarchal traditions) with another form of oppression (capitalist consumption).

Giddens's (1991) concepts of "the reflexivity of the self" and "individualisation and detraditionalisation" (1991, 1992) are also applied in this research to examine how Lao women are changing their role and status through making their own choices and decisions to recast their traditional family structures and romantic relationships. Giddens (1992) explains how women's increasing individualisation – which in turn shapes their personal and family lives within the traditional patriarchal family - corresponds to the larger processes of detraditionalisation of society, allowing women to explore self-identity, experience modern life and also have more individual choices to create a different life for themselves. For example, many young educated women in China are choosing to be single (To, 2013), while young urban Chinese women are experiencing premarital sex and cohabitation (Hansen and Pang, 2008). On the other hand, I argue that young Lao women's empowerment in family lives and sexual relationships, partly influenced by Thai soap storylines and female protagonists' behaviours has not resulted in the complete destruction of traditional family life in Laos. Although attitudes towards abortion, cohabitation, and same sex relationships are influencing social behaviour in parts of the Lao

community, many women are able to maintain both traditional and contemporary social values and culture.

1.4 Outline of the thesis

This chapter has introduced a theoretical framework on which the study is based on feminist approaches towards individualisation, choice, liberation and women's empowerment in consumerist culture, audience studies in encoding and decoding of media texts, the uses and gratifications approach, women's individualisation and the changing roles of women and detraditionalisation. The development of my interest in transnational female viewers and the consequences of TV viewing in entertainment programmes was outlined, especially TV soap operas and in particular the globalising impact they have on female audiences in relation to dressing and fashion styles, extravagant lifestyles, emancipated lifestyles, romantic relationships, and depictions of beauty. Background information on economic reforms, global media flows and state-initiated resistance to subvert cultural incursions in Laos was provided in order to understand the changes in Lao media and the globalising impact of this media on Lao audiences. Feminist media analysis, exemplified by McRobbie (2008) and Gill, (2007) together with Hall's (1980) encoding-decoding model, and Giddens's (1991, 1992) notion of individualisation and detraditionisation, as well as cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 2012) provide the theoretical structure to the work, deployed to explore Lao women's sense of identity, agency, self-satisfaction, and social aspirations through their viewing of Thai soap opera.

The other chapters in the thesis are organised as follows. Chapter 2 presents the conceptual framework of global media flow and local state resistance in Laos in order to understand the changes in Lao media and the globalising impact of this media on Lao audiences. Chapter 3 contextualises the study in the relevant literature. Chapter 4 presents an account of the research methodology and method. Chapter 5 is the first empirical chapter and provides a discussion of women viewers' responses to Thai TV in relation to their everyday lives. Chapter 6 offers a detailed discussion of young educated women's agency in Lao society, a development which challenges conventional gender beliefs of women as 'passive caretakers.' In addition, women's attitudes towards modern relationships and morality are analysed. Chapter 7 focuses on Lao women's desires and aspirations around concepts of beauty, especially in relation to skin tone and body shape. Chapter 8 brings the findings of the work together in the conclusion and explores the implications for contemporary Lao women's identity and agency. I also discussed the Lao government's efforts to subvert modern media threaded throughout the thesis.

This study argues that although many Lao women enjoy watching Thai soap operas, some are more able to change their lifestyles than others because of their socio-economic background and other life chances, while some women are not interested in emulating the lifestyles of soap stars. Despite differences in affect and agency, many of the participants in the study simultaneously embrace aspects of traditional culture and modern behaviours, adopting a hybrid existence with which they are comfortable. I suggest that theories developed in Western contexts are not always fully applicable in Eastern contexts and a more nuanced, complex and culturally-specific lens needs to be used in order to better understand the ways in which women negotiate the seductions of popular media in the context of a patriarchal society such as Laos.

Chapter 2. Globalisation, Consumption Culture and Women's Desires

2.1 Introduction

Global economic reform, which has sparked economic, political and social change in contemporary Laos, is the catalyst for the transformation of various aspects of people's lifestyles (Rehbein, 2011; Schenk-Sandbergen, 2012). According to Stuart Hall (1997), debates about the cultural impact of global media are at the forefront of current considerations of globalisation. The relationship between the media and the associated cultural tension is addressed in this thesis, as this is a major contributor to the public understanding of the socioeconomic growth of nation states and processes of cultural diversification, as well as conceptions of national identity. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a conceptual framework of global and regional media flows and of local state resistance in Laos in order to understand the changes in Lao media and the globalising impact of the media on Lao female television viewers, who are the focus of this research.

Section 2.2, 'Globalisation of the media and of cultural identity', reviews the concept of globalisation as a key issue in communication studies, providing definitions of globalisation, homogenisation and heterogenisation (Robertson, 2012), global flows and contra-flows (Thussu, 2007), and hybridisation (Pieterse, 1994; Bhabha, 2012), including its impact on Lao media, and on television in particular. These theories and approaches are drawn to develop my understanding of the Lao situation. This section also reviews de-Westernisation criticisms, developed by Koichi Iwabuchi (2014), of the application of Western approaches with little localised adaptation or integration of local frameworks for investigating non-Western countries, such as the case study of Laos. Also discussed are the politics and quality of television in Laos and the cultural measures taken to stop the erosion of indigenous modern culture associated with the foundational context of Thai television consumption in Laos.

The next section describes women's growing sense of agency by drawing on Anthony Giddens's concept of individualisation and addresses the increasingly diverse roles of women resulting from their movement into the labour market. Thanks to the impact of global media on urbanised and industrialised societies from the 1990s onward, women as an audience have gained access to more information; have gained greater personal autonomy, or at least a desire for personal autonomy, as part of the (Western) trend of individualisation; and have increased

freedom of choice in their lives. In order to have a better understanding of the impact of the media on women's identity formation, as well as its place in countries such as Laos, it is useful to review the individualisation of women in the wake of fully established modernisation through the thesis of detraditionalisation expressed as individualisation in the context of Lao society. The individualisation theory advanced by Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992) and Ulrich Beck (1992) suggests that women's lives have become freer, thereby changing the roles and status of women, enabling them to make choices and decisions on their own, and to express romantic and sexual intimacy. Meanwhile, these changes have devastating effects on traditions and social life that are in a state of detraditionalisation, in which tradition has changed its status.

The third section, 2.4, presents feminist debates on and critiques of the thesis of individualisation, which is associated with the trend of detraditionalisation. Feminist critiques highlight the mismatch between women's aspirations towards equality and choice and the sociological reality of continuing inequality and subordination that is evident in the patriarchal attitude of the Lao government, which attempts to regulate women's behaviour, for example through dress codes. Meanwhile, the increasing choice and agency of women that is portrayed in the mainstream media presents women's empowerment in consumerist culture. Western television series and other entertainment media also disseminate Western values through the representation of women's sexual freedom and bodily empowerment in terms of fashion and female bodies (Arthurs, 2003).

TV programmes also reflect anxiety that women's rights are left in abeyance. Feminist scholars disclose behind-the-scenes pictures of the intensification of popular feminism among young women striving to revive the feminist movement and to stimulate the younger generation of women to be an active audience and not to misunderstand the essence of feminism (for examples of this approach, see Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). Feminist approaches are necessary tools for assessing the impact of cross-border media consumption on the sense of agency and identity formation amongst Lao women. Section 2.4 thus helps to examine the rise of equality among young Lao women in relation to their lifestyles and relationships through the lens of consumption of Thai television soap operas.

2.2 Globalisation of the media and of cultural identity

The debate about globalisation has been influential in audience research since the early 1990s (Featherstone, Lash and Robertson, 1995). Harvey (1990) defines globalisation as a space-time

compression process, while Cooppan (2001, p. 15) states that it is “a process of cross-cultural interaction, exchange, and transformation”. Giddens (1990, p. 175) argues that globalisation was “one of the fundamental consequences of modernity, which introduces new forms of world interdependence”: he contends that modernity “is inherently globalising” (p. 177). The major distinctive characteristic of a global society is a homogenising cultural process (Robertson, 1992), which implies the weakening of state power (Beck, 2000) and the erosion of boundaries between nation states and sociocultural issues, economics, and politics (Holm and Sørensen, 1995; Splichal, 2009). As Legrain (2002, p. 4) points out, “Globalisation is shorthand for how our lives are becoming increasingly intertwined with those of distant people and places around the world—economically, politically and culturally”.

Another characteristic of globalisation is de-territorialisation: the diminishing importance and power of nation states in the everyday flow of cultural experiences (Canclini, 1995; Tomlinson, 1999). Cultural globalisation is further conceptualised as “a fluid, interconnected, conflicting and dynamic process” (Cuddy-Keane, 2003) that poses a threat to local cultures. Culturally, the increasing global flows of economic movement and tourism development have led to the broad reconfiguration of social life. Cultural globalisation tends to offer images of alternative lifestyles in faraway places. As Appadurai (1999) notes, transnational media flows from centre to periphery produce images of well-being that change local or national audiences’ lifestyles, leading to women having more opportunities to join the labouring and manufacturing workforce. For example, Luang Prabang, a UNESCO world heritage site in Northern Laos, has attracted global advertising and tourists, leading to cultural loss, the violation of local ways of life, and a concerning breach of heritage security by the Lao government (Beliner, 2012). Globalisation has also transformed the broader trends of women’s material lives and work in local economies, as is evident in the effects of production and trading activities within the market economy and market liberalisation of Laos (Kusakabe, 2004).

In addition, the fundamental global dominance of certain national media, most notably American media (Robertson (2003) refers to this as Americanisation), has resulted in the spread of economic investment and cultural influences into the developing world and the promotion of a Western cultural hegemony, seen in examples such as the Disney Corporation (Yin, 2014) and global news agencies such as CNN and the BBC (Bielsa and Bassnett, 2009). This suggests that the cultural homogenisation enacted by American TV dominates other media industries and diminishes the role of national and local media, via what Herman and McChesney (2001) refer to as media imperialism rather than globalisation. Indeed, media systems theorists, such

as Hallin and Mancini (2004), recognise that media globalisation in the United States and most of Western Europe could promote greater homogenisation of European media systems among small countries.

The concept of media imperialism has been criticised by many media and cultural studies scholars, most notably Tomlinson (1991), McQuail (1994), and Golding and Harris (1997). Their criticisms focus on active audience studies, while critics of the independent role of culture argue that both global and national media can be seen as homogenising processes, in the same way as the national media can be seen as either encouraging homogenisation (standardisation or uniformity) or heterogeneity (diversity, variation) depending upon the power of cultural contents (Rantanen, 2005; Lull, 2006). In this situation, local cultures can survive the influence of globalisation and homogenous culture; the concept of hybridisation is used to define this different view of the effects of globalisation (Bhabha, 2012).

Hybridity has become an interesting aspect of cultural globalisation focused on cultural exchanges on a global scale. Pieterse (2004, 2015) has explained the mixing of culture and cross-influence in relation to cultural hybridisation, concerning the merging of traditional cultural styles with elements of urbanised cultures. Hybridisation is regarded as a concept-breaker of cultural invasion and global homogenisation. It demonstrates a local capacity to “assimilate a message and incorporate it into one’s life” (Thompson, 1995, p. 42). Local or traditional cultures are not necessarily expunged by a dominant foreign culture: “Rather, encounters with foreign influences can stimulate local innovation” (Huang, 2011, p. 4). For example, Laotian youth who work across borders in the neighbouring country of Thailand in order to earn money and pursue a better life, accept Western values as intermixed with their traditional perspectives (Huijsmans, 2008; Law, Sonn, and Mackenzie, 2014). In a sense, they are negotiating the clashes between global demands and traditional values.

Moreover, to further clarify the heterogenizing face of cultural globalisation, Robertson (2012) introduces a tension between homogenization and heterogenization. He explains how a perspective of locality “is exhibited in the various ethnic nationalisms” (p.192) as a form of resistance to global identity formation, in which patterns of locality are not significantly homogenised. In this context, one may consider the phenomenon of non-Western regions being encouraged by the production and presentation of contra-flows (Thussu, 2007), for example, Bollywood films for a South Asian audience (Govil, 2007) and Japanese TV programmes for an East Asian audience (Iwabuchi, 2015). As Appadurai (1990, p. 295) notices “the people of

Iran Java, Indonesianization may be more worrisome than Americanization, as Japanization may be for Korean, Indianisation for Sri Lankans, Vietnamization for Cambodians”.

Appadurai (1999) highlights that in postmodernity ‘the work of the imagination’ helps people to escape an ordinary life and allow them to consider migration and joining transnational movements. People express their imagination in social life through their patterns of consumption, style and taste (Appadurai, 1999). His idea of ‘the work of the imagination’ corresponds with Anderson’s (1991) notion of ‘imagined communities’, as an engagement with a sense of community. Previously, the imagined community, which meant a community whose members will not all meet one another but still accept the fact that they are part of the same community, was constructed by the mass media, particularly the print media. This was the means by which an understanding of the imagined community was expanded since newspapers are (or were) delivered to readers on a daily or weekly basis. Although this form of news reporting obtains material from many sources or places, all readers can acknowledge that it happens at the same time, in the same place, and it is reported in the same language that all are familiar with.

When a new form of mass media, television, emerged in 1929, the imagined community continued in the communication world. As Barker (1999) claimed, no medium speaks to masses of people more effectively than television, and it is a critical player in the process of nation building. For example, during the broadcasting of the 2009 Southeast Asian Games in Vientiane, Laos, when the weight-lifting competition final round was televised, the majority of Lao people were glued to their screens to cheer on their country’s female representatives.⁹ This television process can produce and present an ‘imagined community’ to audiences participating in the national consciousness in the dimensions of time and space. In this sense, it can be said that *cross-border* TV consumption limits the sovereignty of a nation, but it also creates problems of tracing a boundary around the nation as well as allowing members of an imagined community to glimpse lifestyles in other communities.

Flew (2007) further distinguishes the impact of global media culture in contemporary globalisation or global flows, splitting it into four discrete aspects that describe how the global media shapes cultural experiences. Firstly, he discusses “culture as a lived and shared

⁹Keuakham Ly became the ‘heroine of the weights’ of Laos, and received fame on winning the gold medal in the competition, the woman weight 53 kilogram. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weightlifting_at_the_2009_Southeast_Asian_Games.

experience” (p.139), taken from Williams’s (1976) ideas about how people’s ways of life and social practices are structured by media representation and power. Secondly, he examines “Culture as mediated symbolic communication, since every aspect of social life is shaped by a network of representations such as text, images, talk, codes of behaviour and narratives” (Flew, 2007, p. 140). These behaviours and our identities are shaped by the media (Kellner, 1995); therefore, we can learn about ways of life from the global media (Wark, 1994). Thirdly, Flew looks at “Culture as resource” (p. 141), which is linked to cultural capitalism (Yudice, 2003, p. 9) and can be used to create value and help to buy and sell goods. Finally, he deals with “Culture as policy discourse” (p. 143): nation states have often employed culture as a tool to govern citizens. This notion from Foucault’s (1982) observation that governments manage their citizens by shaping their identities rather than by using negative strategies such as banning their actions. The censorship of media messages as cultural sources in China is an example of avoiding subversion of national cultures and the state authority (Xu, 2014).

With regards to the imbalance of global media flows, the relationship between globalisation and culture probably involves global and local intersections, where cultures shape the trajectories of global media. Simultaneously, cultural connections between popular media in a globalised world are negotiated by transnational audiences and the political power of the state. Furthermore, the rise of de-Westernising knowledge production can occur in non-Western countries in the field of communication and the role of the media. De-westernisation is the key force in this context, and in the case of Laos because it allows this research to address in more depth the defence of Lao traditional cultures in relation to cultural policy.

The concept of de-Westernisation has been raised by the globalisation of audiences due to the rise of East and South Asian, and Latin American media, with their creation of global markets (Curran and Park, 2000; Tapas, 2012; Thussu, 2013). De-Westernisation can be understood as “an act of cultural defence, an anti-imperialist strategy to nurture academic sovereignty, a call for embracing an analytical perspective that reflects a decentred, dynamic contemporary world” (Waisbord and Mellado, 2014, p.363). De-Westernisation challenges and reconsiders “the West’s dominance (real or imagined) as a conceptual “force” and representational norm” (Bâ and Higbee, 2012, p.3). Similarly, Jack Goody has argued that “the Western domination of the world of knowledge and of world culture persists in some respects but has been significantly loosened. It would argue that globalisation is no longer exclusively Westernization” (Goody, 2010, p. 125).

Asian researchers do not often seem to have employed the concept of the de-Westernising of production to investigate non-Western regions, and there is little evidence of the term ‘de-Westernisation’ in and on Asian contexts (Erni and Chua, 2005; Iwabuchi, 2014; Waisbord and Mellado, 2014). In response to this, Iwabuchi (2014, p. 44) suggests the innovative term “inter-Asian referencing” to remove this predicament from the academic debate. He agrees with Duara’s (2010) idea, as debated by Spivak (2008), that to understand the Asia region “we need to recognize our interdependence and foster transnational consciousness in our education and cultural institutions, not at the cost but for the cost of our national attachments” (p. 982). This research hence takes “inter-Asian referencing” as a shared matter of academic research to guide the examination of media culture connection in Southeast Asia, specifically, Thailand and Laos. The study aims to transnationally enrich peripheral perspectives ignored in Western academia, by taking Lao women as a strategic case study to reflect the strengths of local and cultural traditions in the urbanisation of Laos¹⁰. Hybridity, local resistance, and contra-flows media are all important for enhancing understanding of Lao circumstances in this research.

In the following sections, therefore, socioeconomic changes in Laos are explored, including the discourse of economic globalisation, the role of Lao national television and anti-globalisation responses in the form of local state resistance designed to protect national culture.

2.2.1 The rise of modernity and a globalised society in Laos

Since 1986, the Lao economic system has been in transition from a centrally managed economy to a market-oriented economy (known as the New Economic Mechanism, or Chintanakan Mai). The transition presents more opportunities for trade and investment and also communication exchange. In addition, Laos joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997, and since then has been part of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). This has led Laos into a process of urbanisation and modernisation, has introduced elements of neoliberal culture, and has generated free trade and more information sharing (Governor’s Statement No. 25, 9 October 2015). In this sense, neoliberal culture ‘as a structure of feeling impels us to extend the market and all mindsets into all spheres of human life, to move the ideology of consumer choice,

¹⁰ Laos is a socialist republic which espouses Marxism and Leninism. Theravada Buddhism has long been one of the most important social forces in Laos. Laos has been referred to as one of East Asia and the Pacific’s fastest growing economies by the World Bank, with annual GDP growth averaging 7.8% for the past decade (World Bank, 2017).

to the centre of individual existence' (Ventura, 2016, p. 2). Trade liberalisation in Laos started in 1990 and was intended to end poverty through economic integration into the global economy (Ishi, 2010). According to a recent economic forecast report for Southeast Asia, the Lao economy is firmly headed towards capitalist-style growth and development, driven mainly by strong electricity exports from hydropower development from 2001 to the present (Asian Development Outlook, 2017).

The symbiotic modernisation and globalisation of Laos has led not only to economic growth but also to sociocultural transformation (Pholsena, 2011; Bouté and Pholsena, 2017). Laos has been turning into a globalising society on the back of its rapid economic growth in recent years, and although earlier structures and cultural mores persist, they are being reactivated, modified and superseded by foreign structures and cultures (Rehbein, 2007; Leung *et al.*, 2010; Marks, 2011; Schenk-Sandbergen, 2012; Ku, 2016). The process of globalisation relating to Laos is introducing new improved standards of living; the value of commercial goods has risen; living in the capital city of Vientiane has become more convenient; and Laotians can access Western ideas and values through global and regional media (Rehbein, 2011).

The *nayobai peht patu*, or 'open door policy', launched in 1990, has presented more Laotians with opportunities for external trade and foreign investment (Thammavong, 2008) and also for communication exchange, with a new TV channel broadcasting in Vientiane¹¹ (Evans, 1998). The Lao government has also substantively promoted foreign assistance (Phouxay *et al.*, 2010). As a result of this economic policy, Laos and Thailand have depended on each other for trade and goods for more than two decades, with Thailand typically achieving a surplus balance of trade, which has impacted on people's way of life in Lao rural areas (Rigg, 2007; Matthews, 2012). As Phetsiriseng (2001) shows in his schematised data of Laos, when Laotians come back from visiting Thailand 'they have better life and nice clothes, they appreciate city life and also aspire to seek jobs in Thailand' (p. 34). Similarly, the expansion of existing trade between Thailand and Laos has generated new kinds of economic relationships, such as investment, tourism, and banking, which have affected the lives of local people and have reduced poverty in Vientiane (Khaeso, 2010).

¹¹ In April 1994, the Thai Telecommunications Company, or Shin Satellite Public Company Limited, was given permission to begin broadcasting Channel 3 in Vientiane to celebrate the opening of the Friendship Bridge between Thailand and Laos. From April 1995, the Lao government operated this channel and took control of information, distributing propaganda (Evans, 1998).

As noted, Giddens (1990) defined globalisation as “a consequence of modernity” (p. 175). Evidence for this proposal is shown in the consequences of the expansion of foreign investment in Laos (Sims, 2017). In the southern part of Laos, economic growth and transportation and communication facilities have been enhanced through capitalism (Andriessse, 2011). This demonstrates that Laos has entered into the capitalist arena (Yamada 2013), resulting in the rapid growth of the economy not only in Vientiane, but also in other urban areas of the country. A number of other outcomes of the advent of capitalism include better education, increased life expectancy, and a higher standard of living, raising its status to a medium level of human development (Human Development Report, 2015). This is also evidenced by the convening of a new stock market in the capital in 2011 (Laos country review, 2016).

However, the state regime is now pursuing modernity in the aspect of human social life; in other words, it links the topics of identity and culture to overpowering a sense of economic backwardness in Lao society. The understanding of modernity and the global spread of capitalism are taken into account in “a negotiation between Western and local values within the framework of twenty-first-century globalisation”, which has happened around the world and also in Laos (Rehbein, 2016, pp. 1–2). Today Laos, especially Vientiane, needs to achieve a balance between economic development and growth management in order to cope with the cultural changes resulting from the overwhelming force of globalisation (Vongpraseuth and Choi, 2015). For example, Barker, Harms, and Lindquistthe (2013) highlight how Miss Beer Lao become an iconic figure of those globalised norms. While the government of Laos seeks through an authoritarian political system to create a secular identity within a modern society, it has failed to promote feelings of belonging among the wider population, while at the same time creating new problems such as social anomie (Keyes, Hardacre, and Kendell, 1994).

Pholsena’s work on the politics of culture and identity (2006) confirms that the crisis of authority has led to the resurgence of religion because it fulfils people’s needs for commitment and sharing. Therefore, expressions of identity and national sentiment among Southeast Asians in four Theravada Buddhist countries (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia) may differ from those featured in the model inspired by Western ideals. In fact, the Lao government has also been trying to present a secularised image of Buddhism in order to reconcile religion with political ideology: Buddhism, Pholsena found, was a “symbol of Lao identity” (p. 67). Stuart-Fox’s research (2010) produces a comparable account of cultural identity in Lao society: the karma and rebirth elements of Theravada Buddhism have shaped Laotians’ beliefs and cultural values.

Feminist debates on globalisation have discussed the situation of women with the aim of improving women's lives and ending women's suppression which stems from patriarchy. The crossroads of women's movements from the feminist struggle to women's role in economic life suggests that an individual woman is more liberated under neoliberalism (Eisenstein, 2010).

Prechel and Harms (2007, p. 4) argue that "neoliberalism suggests that individuals are free to choose". Women's individual freedom are applied in their aspect of life such as relationships (Kinsella, 2017). On the other hand, the media both ingested and inverted the concepts of the feminist movement in the 1970s, reworking it for the needs of consumer culture (see Rosen, 2000), and the representation of women's bodies (Shanley and Pateman, 2007). Returning to the issue of the introduction and expansion of capitalist economics in Laos, my study focuses on Lao women in three lowland areas of Laos: Vientiane, Houayxay, and Bolikhamsai, where all three places the study of women's achievement of autonomy is limited.

Studies of transnational labour forces in the Asian realm, especially of the Hmong in Southeast Asia, are introduced here to demonstrate the parallels and differences between Lao women in this study and the specific ethnic group of Hmong. The Hmong traditionally believe that a woman should be industrious, sacrificing her personal life to labour to maintain family relationships. A result of a deeply patriarchal society (Lee *et al.*, 2006), the Hmong see their femininity as being bound up with being a wife and a mother (Symonds, 2004). The Hmong as migrant women also tend to be involved in social practices in the countries where they temporarily and permanently reside (Dobrowolsky, 2016).

The transnational movement of Hmong women as wage labourers is related to changing gender norms. Hmong women in Northern Thailand are facing changing socioeconomic contexts, with some holding steady jobs and others laboured working in urban areas in order to support their household expenses (Siriphon, 2006). Most Hmong women in Vietnam have decided to leave their villages and reject marriage opportunities to pursue a better life in the urban area of Sa Pa city, an area where tourism is developing rapidly. In doing so, they are constructing a symbolic modern lifestyle and emulating Western tourists' lifestyles, that of a 'modern woman', while also being the traditional 'dutiful daughter' at the same time (Hanh, 2008, p. 232).

On this point, although early marriage is still a common practice in the Hmong community (Vang and Bogenschutz, 2014), there is a tendency for young Hmong women who have a higher education or a career to reject teenage marriage and/or arranged marriages (Nguyen, Oosterhoff

and White, 2011). Gender, status, and class are intertwined with this changing sociocultural trend, and they are the key ideas used to explore women's daily transnational media consumption in this study.

As noted, Hmong women as wage labourers are transforming traditional values of femininity (Hanh, 2008). It might be expected that the more young Lao women in this study are able to have a career and earn a living, the more their understandings of gender norms and women's status will be transformed. This would show their modern lifestyle and a more consumer-oriented behaviour. At the same time, older Lao women living in rural areas with limited income and less education may differ from the young Lao women in terms of their understanding of the role and status of women. The older working class women might be expected to maintain the traditional value of being a good wife and good mother.

Within Laos, the recent development of free-market capitalism has encouraged Lao rural women to expand their working horizons. For example, Lao female workers in the garment industry are eager to have convenient lives and the freedom to be like modern women who possess money, smartphones, fashionable clothes, and cosmetics; however, they experience on a daily basis unequal status and low wages (Khamphouvong and Santasombat, 2014). The interconnection of economic, cultural, and societal aspects of post-socialist Laos is proposed my hypothesis here. Lao women today desire for consumption choice and aspire to live in freedom and equality, thereby changing women's roles and duties. Cultural globalisation significantly results in increased consumer capitalism and reduced attachment to traditional values (Tomlinson, 1999), changing especially the identities of adolescents and young people.

2.2.2 The politics and the quality of TV in Laos

Global media is typically identified as a key force that makes the landscape of power and social action increasingly post-national in its forms and structures (Castells, 2009; Howard, 2011). According to Redfield *et al.* (1936), 'acculturation' is meant "those phenomena which results when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either of both groups" (p. 149). Acculturation also occurs through the cross-cultural exchanges via media that result from cultural globalisation, which is evident in increased expectations among adolescents due to the media portrayal of luxury lifestyles and different values (Ferguson *et al.*, 2017).

It is reasonable to assume that acculturation brings about sociocultural adaptations in cross-cultural TV consumption in this Lao case study. Young Lao women may acculturate to American or European cultures via Thai TV soaps in terms of values of a wealthy nuclear family, and also woman's freedom of choice, but at the same time they may maintain their traditional custom of 'being a good daughter.' Yet despite this influence on individual identity, most national media systems are still rooted in geographically located national media cultures, domestic politics, and power. Preferences for local content remain strong (Straubhaar, 2007), particularly in television and screen media, where the nation state is still the main identity through which the media address their audiences for all nations. Similarly, Lao radio and television have mostly produced educational content in order to promote beautiful cultures and traditional ways of life to Lao citizens (Nunta, 1999).

Historically, the establishment of television channels in Laos has encountered a wide range of problems: lack of knowledgeable and capable personnel, lack of new technology in content production and signal transmission, and lack of a budget to produce quality television programmes (Douangkeo, 2006). After Laos gained its independence from France in 1975, the economy and politics of the country descended into chaos and confusion. The Lao People's Revolution Party (LPRP) started to develop the country and mainly focused on poverty reduction. Thus, the development of mass communication was not considered urgent and important at that time. Nevertheless, Douangkeo (2006) noted that the LPRP had a long-term plan to develop the radio and television to propagandise their ideas and encourage all Lao people to protect the nation's sovereignty. In 1976-1979 the LPRP's plan to create a television station obtained an enthusiastic response from a population that had already enjoyed access to Thai and Vietnamese television. So in 1980 the Lao government decided to establish the Lao National Television (LNTV station) to meet the Lao people's needs and to communicate state policies to citizens (Ta Ngno Tern, 2011).

In early 1983, the government sent officials to Vietnam on training programmes to learn how to produce television channels and content. Subsequently, on 1st December 1983, LNTV was established and aired in Vientiane, the capital city, funded partly by the Lao government but also financial aid from socialist such as Vietnam, the Soviet Union, Hungary and East Germany. In 1987, UNESCO gave 45,000 US dollars to support to Lao television, specifically for use in electronic tools and applications for TV productions. In 1989 and 1993, the Japanese government sponsored Lao television to the tune of nine million US dollars for the construction of a TV station and an outside broadcasting (OB) vehicle to broadcast important national days

and events associated with these holidays. On 8th February 1995, the Ministry of Information and Culture cooperated with Chinnawat Company (Thailand) to establish IBC TV station, but two years later the Chinnawat company was forced to withdraw from the project and turn over IBC fully to the Lao government. Today, LNTV comes under the Ministry of Information and Culture.

Laos's media began under governmental control and was aimed at stimulating economic and social development, although it has made little progress due to a lack of funding, broadcasting regulations, and controlling agendas (Somphavong, 1999; Douangkeo, 2006). In the period 1975–1987, Laos did not have its own television network, and Lao people traditionally watched Thai television instead. Lao national television was established in 1987, but it could not compete with the variety offered by Thai television companies and still trails them (BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, Far East, 17 April 1988). Political factors seem to determine changes in the media system and broadcasting in Laos.

According to Lao Media Law (2014), the content of all TV programmes must be in keeping with the ideals of public order and good morals, and all programmes require permission from the media management authority concerned before being broadcast. Today Lao television stations are comprised of the following: Lao National TV Channel 1 (established in 1983) and Lao National TV Channel 3 (started in 1994), which are controlled by Lao national TV; Lao PSTV (2011) (Public Security TV), which is controlled by the police; and five other private television stations: Lao Star channel (1998), Cable TV (1998), Terrestrial Digital TV (2007) TVLao (2012), and MVLao (2012), all of which are monitored by Lao national TV. In this situation, there are concerns about Western values presented in non-Lao TV in citizens' media consumptions. The regulation thus imposes censorship on all Lao TV contents to provide additional national and cultural securities.

The Lao socialist government used Lao radio in 1985 to boost their interests and activities rather than to support media freedom (Evans, 1998). Mayes (2009) recognise all television and radio stations, as well as newspapers, as tools which serve the interests of the government, the revolution, and the state. As such, the government's media policies are seen by Grant Evans (1998) and Vatthana Pholsena (2006) as being either technologically redundant or symptomatic of what Beck (2007, p. 286) termed "methodological nationalism", a process which "subsumes society under the nation-state".

This is particularly evident in Lao government-controlled films and the creative output of filmmakers. Christopherson (2015) claims that the “Lao government buried the filmmakers’ creative voices for over 30 years” (p. 99). Lao films today still have to gain permission from Lao Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism. Lao cinematic features must “receive a stamp of approval before being distributed and broadcast. Filmmakers must still navigate a difficult path as they try to create and publish their films” (p. 98). It is likely that the narrative and the production of Lao films must be positive stories and have a beneficial effect on Lao moviegoers, which may also happen to be relevant in Lao broadcasting. Unsurprisingly, press freedom in Laos is also severely curtailed, with media status and environment seen as ‘not free’¹².

Lao television programming was also shaped to also impose the national interest in a propagandised form of media content, *kan khosana suan seau*, which broadly means ‘broadcasting with the intention of influencing people’s beliefs’. In accordance with Lao Media Law (2014), in terms of functionalism Lao television has a duty to “protect and encourage traditional patriotism and the fundamental solidarity of the national family; publish accurate news stories which are beneficial to the nation and people; create a positive atmosphere in society; and ensure that media products such as images, voices and languages are in the approved, established form” (2014, pp. 7–10). Therefore, Lao television is crucial for building and maintaining power as a hegemonic force and concealing information from society, as well as disseminating preferred news, feature stories and other notices, and correcting ‘errors’.

The state also directly interferes with the content of individual television programmes. This may help to preserve national interests and cultures, but it ignores the needs of citizens in terms of media consumption. Man Chan (1994, 2015) found that when local media was unsatisfying, audiences were eager to watch imported programmes. This is supported by Polnigongit’s (2011) work, which found that Thai broadcasting has long played an important role in Laotians’ way of life and in Thai–Lao relations. He states that the vast majority of Lao people (97.25 per cent) listen to Thai border radio, while Thai people rarely listen to Lao border radio. Laotians’ exposure to foreign radio has produced greater aspirations for working, trading, shopping, and travelling in Thailand. Likewise, the influence of the Thai language in Lao society occurs

¹² ‘In Laos, where the ruling party is wary of growing social media use by the youth population, three citizens were arrested under a 2014 decree banning online criticism of the government when they returned home to renew their passports, having posted the content in question on Facebook while working abroad in Thailand’ (FreedomHouse, 2017, p. 18).

because Laotians typically watch Thai television and have borrowed new words from Thai (Chanthao, 2012).

It is useful to provide a brief history of Thai television and its political economy in order to compare it with Lao television. The television system in Thailand began with an October 1929 letter from Prime Minister Plaek Phibunsongkham to the country's Public Relations Department to supply television sets. The prime minister also sent nine people to receive training in broadcasting systems, programming and production at the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Then the government established a television station on behalf of Thai Television Ltd (บริษัท ไทยโทรทัศน์ จำกัด หรือ สถานีโทรทัศน์ช่อง 4 บางขุนพรหม). Thai television was first broadcasted to test the electronic system and technology on 14th July, 1952, and officially transmitted to the Thai people on 24th June 1955, and was presented as a gift to the Thai people from the government. In this sense, television can be seen as a barometer of social progress as well as a showpiece of modern civilisation. At the beginning of Thai television, there were three objectives for broadcasting: to inform, to educate and to entertain. Thai television benefited greatly the Thai economy in relation to TV programme production and advertising, although the fundamental rationale for visual broadcasting was political.

According to Kidkamsaun (2014), Thai TV programmes, especially TV commercials, influence young Lao women's attitudes and values in relation to the whiteness discourse, in which portrayals of Thai female white-skinned singers and actresses are regarded as those of modern women. Similarly, Srisana Srilan, the former Lao Minister of News, Culture and Tourism (cited in Nitikhetchreecha, 2001) states that Thai radio, television and film dominate the entertainment media industry in Laos; thus, Thai media are known to be highly valued by Laotians. In short, Thai media dominate television consumption in Laos.

2.2.3 Cultural measures to stop the erosion of national culture

As discussed above, Laotians' consumption of Thai broadcasting seems to play a crucial role in Lao people's lifestyles (see e.g. Polnigongit, 2011). The population, as a transnational audience, has gained numerous new sources of information and broadened its horizons in a way that was formerly prevented by the secrecy of the regime (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2002). There is a paradoxical interplay between politics and the mass media in relation to the policy of

preventing the distribution of media and mitigating its perceived effects, especially those of media with visual dialogue and narrative. For example, showings of the American film *Fifty Shades Darker* have been cancelled at all three cinemas in Laos, since it failed to obtain the Film Authorisation Permit that is required for each film shown in Laos. It was announced that ‘after inspecting the contents of this film, it was found to be inappropriate to be shown, due to the film’s obscenity; therefore, it is forbidden to show this film in the Lao PDR.’ (*Laotian Times*, 2017).

The nation state can impose a strict agenda and various types of control mechanisms in order to mitigate the impact of media cross-cultural communication from neighbouring and foreign countries. On 14 October 1999, the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture issued Notice No. 848 in an attempt to reduce the loss of culture and restrict the impact of outside influences. This notice attempts to regulate activities in entertainment locations; for example, it forbids foreign songs from being played or sung at events except those in which foreigners participate, in which case foreign songs must be limited to only 20 percent of the total music played. The national dress code is subjected to similar rules; thus “it is strictly forbidden for men to wear eccentric clothes or to have long hair or earrings, and women are not allowed to wear trousers or skirts, or any kind of clothing that is contrary to Lao traditions” (Pholsena, 2006, p. 74). Since Lao women are viewed as being enthusiastic economic pillars of the family who are dedicated to their husbands and children (Xayxana, 2005).

In accordance with this conservative ideal, Lao women are charged with the responsibility for upholding national interests and/or ideological priorities, protecting the nation against the negative impacts of globalisation. For comparison, in Denmark, the challenge for women’s equal rights is very broadly seen as shaped by national values such as the “Danish way of life” and “Danish family values” (Liinason and Meijer, 2017, p. 2). In this context, Laotians’ consumption of Thai television in neoliberal culture, situated as a political ideology, leads to the question of how policies or measures can ensure the preservation of the culture of Laos, particularly Lao women’s identity. This cross-border media consumption places increasing pressure on Lao identity and culture. Thai media seem to provide freedom from social constrictions and to allow urban audiences to engage in untraditional relationships. Thai media programmes such as dramas and soaps convey dominant values that foster emotional expressions such as hope, love and excitement; these expressions pervade Thai media representations.

2.3 The effects of detraitionalisation on women and gender relations

The changing role and status of women allow us to scrutinise a facet of women's emancipation in relation to gender oppression and hostility. As part of "the reflexive project of the self" (Giddens, 1991, p. 2), for Giddens (1992, 1998) personal female choices and agency come about with the advent of individualisation, which frames boundaries between femininity and masculinity. Highlighting the principle of equality of personal ties, Giddens explains the rise of personal female autonomy and agency as part of the rise in what he calls the 'pure relationship' or equal relationship: a relationship based on equality between partners, which isn't controlled by one partner. This contrasts with traditional societies characterised by arranged marriages or other kinds of influence from parents and wider kin. Giddens argues that this democratisation of intimacy becomes an essential element for sustaining intimacy in late modern societies.

Giddens (1992) examines social change in terms of the concept of individualisation to explain the transformation of sexuality and love in Western societies: a pure relationship providing a theoretical framework for mutual respect and understanding of partnerships or requiring love relationship equality in personal lives. It is argued that changes in women's personal and family life and in the burdens of household family from the patriarchal structure imply women's increasing individualisation and the improving equal status of women (Chambers, 2012). McRobbie (2009) gives further attention to "the process of feminist disarticulation" (p. 43), which links to Giddens's (1991) and Beck's (1992) concepts of vulnerable societies in modernisation, providing their explanations of the lack of a process for women's individualisation, for monitoring women's independence, and for cultural and social embeddedness.

The reform of the distinctive individual personality with the reflexivity of the self in modernity is explained in Giddens (1991). He argues that social transformation corresponds with the detraditionalisation of society, allowing women to explore self-identity, experience modern life and also have more individual choices to create a different life for themselves, such as through the decision of whether and when to marry, how many children to have, and how they express their sexuality. Research into this in China and Vietnam found an understating of unbalanced intimate relations in femininity values, resulting in an increase in the number of never-married or single professional Chinese women (To, 2013), the spread of free love and individual choice for young rural Chinese women (Hansen and Pang, 2008), and the shaping of a new Vietnamese

middle- and upper-class feminine sexuality (Nguyen-Vo, 2009), all coming about because of women's media consumption.

However, Kanitta Kantavichai (2013) states that the roles and status of Lao women have always involved acting as caretakers in everyday life; for example, about seven-tenths of Lao women from the countryside are agriculturalists who have duties such as weaving, cooking, harvesting, and animal husbandry. Similarly, even though US women – as wives, mothers and daughters – are more frequently working outside the home, they are still responsible for domestic chores and cannot refuse the sexual advances of their husbands (Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004). That is to say, gender equality is overlooked and women's agency is limited. One question for the argument in my study is how the social change of the gendered status of young women as a result of their movement into the labour market in post-socialist Laos (where gender hierarchies are actively invoked in citizens' daily lives) affects Lao women's capacity for freedom, change, and gender equality. This relates to the research question: how (if at all) do viewers relate to storylines which portray 'modern' sexual behaviours, fashion, and lifestyles?

Despite the fact that Henman (2007) claims that "the individualisation literature has clearly demonstrated the ways in which individuals in contemporary society conceive of and act on themselves" (p. 183), this might not prove to be true in every society, such as Laos. As Somphongbutkhan (2011) argues, Lao women continue to take responsibility for childcare and to occupy and maintain the role of motherhood. She has summarised the role of women and modern motherhood in the context of the transformation of Lao society as follows: the role and duty of the Lao woman is as daughter, granddaughter, elder sister, younger sister, young woman, and the 'good' wife; she is expected to be hard-working, diligent and grateful to her parents. Lao women who are currently grandmothers and mothers experience this kind of motherhood.

Nevertheless, Laos has been modernising. As a feature of this process, the image of Lao modern women as symbols of motherhood has become flexible and not absolute. Somphongbutkhan (2011) claims that the modern Lao woman was constructed by discourses about independence, sovereignty, rights, and liberty and equality in socialist principles; including discourses of motherhood, such as having a lot of children in order to build the nation, and the slogan of women as 'three goods, two duties', which means that women were encouraged to be good citizens, good mothers, and good wives, and had duties to protect and build the socialist nation as well as to liberate other women. In this context, Lao woman has been one of the country's best-sacrificial cultural family icons, used by the state to control Lao culture.

According to Beck's theory of modernisation and individualisation (1992), modernisation and the rise of individual agency have weakened the traditional networks of family, kinship, and community, social conventions, and religious faith in Western industrial society. The rise of individualisation is also found in a socialist social structure, namely China. As Yunxiang Yan (2010) indicates, after the social changes during the economic and political reforms in the 1990s, women's individualisation was forcefully embedded, dissolving Confucian and patriarchal values and norms. Young Chinese demonstrate ownership of their private lives through individual pursuits such as wearing fashionable clothes, listening to pop music, searching for romantic love, and freedom of marriage, ideas which are absorbed from the media (Yan, 2010). These changes are directly related to the individualisation process.

On the other hand, women are seen as engendering cultural problems when they have the ability to make autonomous choices to fulfil their individual desires within an equal relationship, as expounded by Giddens (1992). Referring to this process as 'detraditionalisation,' he describes this situation as the detraditionalisation of extant values and duties brought about by major changes in personal and family life (Giddens 1998). For Zheng *et al.*, "Detraditionalisation essentially involves the abandonment or reconfiguration of the socio-cultural traditions that had been in place previously, for example the tradition of lifelong marriage or of male dominance linked to a gendered division of labour" (2011, p. 498).

In the discourse on detraditionalisation, the gender positions related to individualised couples, which are more likely to occur in urban middle-class contexts and societies, have been found to have caused a widespread loosening of male power and masculinity in European agricultural families (Brandth, 2002). The relaxation of gender roles, also found in peasant families in China, coincides with the transformation of women's status in the labour market (Johnson, 2009). The reform of the traditional family from extended kin to a nuclear form provides empirical evidence for the breakdown of family and intimate relationships (Bott and Spillius, 2014; Gillies, 2003), and the relaxation of the cultural traditions around premarital sex in China, which is argued to be a pathway to detraditionalisation in non-Western contexts (Zheng *et al.*, 2011).

As Giddens (1991) argues, "the reflexive of the self" (p. 2), in which the body becomes a phenomenon of choices, leads to an eroding of social norms at the same time as empowering individuals, particularly women. The emergence of practices of cohabitation and premarital sex in Laos indicates a slippage of conventional values (WHO, 2013, cited in Singthong, 2015). This situation reflects the risks of social and cultural attitudinal changes towards traditional

femininity in modern societies. Despite this, in Laos, as in other countries in Southeast Asia, premarital sexual relations and abortion are culturally looked down on (Whittaker, 2013).

As noted, it is useful to provide a brief overview of how Lao and Thai society construct and understand what is deemed the 'proper' role of women, demonstrated through custom, culture, certain economic activities, and legislation. From 1986 to the present, the Lao government attempted to influence the socialisation of women to encourage ideals, and values associated with femininity that would support economic development, to attract tourists, and to define a desired sense of nationhood. As Sibounheung (2011) stated, "Women should obtain full-time education to develop themselves and the country, as well as maintain Lao tradition and culture, such as wearing Lao national costume" (p. 4). Sibounheung also found that Lao women have to be kind, polite and humble at all times. Lao women thus lack the freedom to explore alternative conceptualisations of womanhood and femininity.

In addition, the empowerment of Lao female workers based on the gendered division of labour in rural areas has historically been lower than for male workers. Siripholdej (2007) found that jobs for women are devalued in patriarchal society since Lao women are culturally and socially constructed to be household carers (being a good daughter, wife and mother), showing that they still have to work hard every day as labourers to gain low income. However, the Law on Lao Women's Union (No. 31, 2013) issued by the Lao government, has tried to tackle this issue by creating an organisational mechanism to promote women's empowerment and gender equality. The law stipulates that the government will create conditions and opportunities to enable more women to become involved in leadership and management at various levels within different organisations. Yet there remain deep and widespread inequalities of opportunities between men and women in the sphere of employment.

With regard to women's role and status in employment in Thai society, Thai women who work in international companies in Bangkok gain more acceptance as competent co-employees, but the number of Thai women who work at the higher levels of management level is still much lower than men (Arpaket, 2001). Thai women in Satun Province, southern Thailand, fulfil the multiple roles of daughter, daughter in law, wife and mother, while at the same time working outside the home (Longsatia, 2012). As Romanow (2012) noted, "Thai women are now a substantial part of the work place and nearly half of them attend college, but men play a dominant role in this culture" (p. 44).

In addition, Thai women are nurtured through educational and familial socialisation to view non-marital sex as wrongful, and women have to do their best to ensure that their sexuality conforms to social norms about legitimate sex, which powerfully impacts women's beliefs and behaviours in modern lifestyles (Ramingwong, 2007). Ramingwong argued that middle-class Thai women experience sex outside marriage, but they nevertheless accept that only marriage legitimises their sexual relations and thus continue to value the idea of monogamy. That is, Thai society expects women to behave in what are deemed as socially and culturally acceptable ways in expressions of sexuality.

In this context, one of the most important traditional Lao values is that traditionally women preserve their virginity for marriage. This is evident in critiques of the virginity of women in Lao proverbs and textbooks (Rattavong, 2007; Pachavong, 2007; Kongsirirat, 2010). These promote the cultural belief that a Lao woman has to keep her virginity until she gets married in order to increase her value, honour, and self-esteem. Therefore, women need to control their sexual feelings and desires, especially when they are in love. In cases where a woman breaks the social etiquette (which is seen as losing her purity), she brings disgrace on her parents and family, and traditionally, no man would select this kind of woman to be his wife. This is likely to provide a moral dilemma for young Lao women who develop Western values and disobey the traditional norms of the sexually virtuous woman. It also leads to tensions between the younger and older generations' attitudes towards sexuality.

As Lao women are the key focus of my study, the following sections discuss women's rights and inequality on the ground of the equality of the sexes, using the work of two influential feminists: Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill. Their analyses are useful in that they help to establish a critical framework for the analysis of women and especially young women's choices and empowerment as represented in popular culture. This also marks some changes in women's movements and feminist cultural studies, and the consequences of elements of contemporary media in regard to misleading statements about feminism.

Scholarly research into gender and sexuality discusses how gender intersects with class, race and sexuality. According to Robinson (2018), feminist scholars have fought against inequality in interrelated systems of social relations organised by race, class and gender. Robinson argues that the intersection between gender and race is never separated because "whiteness is the hegemonic mode of racial inequality" (p. 7), whereby non-white women are in the front line of racial prejudice (Scarborough, 2018). The issue of gender conflict is therefore studied in some

women of race and different socio-economic classes (Sarmiento, 2012).

Sarmiento (2012) argued that some Asian women negotiate traditional female roles and gender hegemony. It is evident in studies about how modern women in the labour market throughout Asia still experience violence and gendered power structures in the family because how the media portray traditional families continues to reinforce male gender hegemony to women audiences (Soucy, 2001). On this point, gender inequality in family and personal life applies to Lao women's perceptions of romantic storylines and female characters in their daily watching of Thai soap operas. Therefore, post-feminist media studies are highly relevant to this study.

2.4 Feminist approaches towards individualisation, choice and power across the media

This section provides the conceptual frames for examining female agency, individualisation, freedom, and equality based on portrayals of women as active agents of self and as empowered in the media world. First, McRobbie's (2009) work involves the interpretation of Postfeminism and a comprehensive review of (in)-equality's achievement as presented by actresses in films and TV series who make the "undoing of feminism" (p. 11). Young women are offered a notional form of equality, concretised in education and employment, and through participation in consumer culture and civil society. However, real equality does not exist because women's subordination and experiences of inequality remain (McRobbie, 2009).

McRobbie further notes that the freedoms and choices available to young women in the West have been transformed into a form of sexual freedom and the right to enjoy nightlife with alcohol and cigarettes. McRobbie argues that this is not the essence of feminism; therefore, it is important to reawaken the pattern of female achievement so that women will not use only their bodies to strive for female empowerment. Accordingly, modernisation creates a reconfiguration of young womanhood in relation to their choices and empowerment within their lifestyles, so that the representation of young women in the popular entertainment media acts "as a kind of substitute for feminism" (p. 1). This leads to the shaping of feminist media content and the concept of "female individualisation" (p. 16) being replaced by the portrayal of "aggressive individualism" (p. 5).

The meaning of individualisation is usually the increased ability of individuals to construct their own personal lives without the pressures of social norms and the traditional ties of family. In other words, individualisation constitutes the advocacy of women's rights. McRobbie (2004)

calls this female individualisation, which is generally bounded by the contexts of consumption. Although young women might make the choice to be beautiful and sexy, this is an artificial idea of individualisation because what constitutes beauty and sex appeal is defined by commercialism and capitalism (Lazar, 2011; Press, 2011; Tincknell, 2011).

In addition, McRobbie (2009, p. 49) illustrates the individualisation of experiences by arguing that women “are currently being disempowered through the very discourses of empowerment they are being offered as substitutes for feminism”. She states that feminism was disarticulated by media images. The construction of individualisation as a form of sexual hierarchy and female oppression, which resonates with Bauman’s (2003) idea of individualisation, shows that young women’s freedom is in danger of failing to qualify. Thus women’s individual empowerment, as presented in the media, is convincingly refuted by women’s individualisation.

A second contribution to the literature on contemporary female agency comes from Rosalind Gill (2007), who clarifies the connection between postfeminism and neoliberalism with examples from contemporary Anglo-American media. She argues that “postfeminism is understood as a distinctive sensibility, made up of a number of interrelated themes characterised by: bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification; self-surveillance; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual differences; a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism, and commodification of difference” (p. 147). This resonates with the changes that have occurred for Lao women audiences, in that capitalism in Vientiane city has produced aspirations for, and the potential of, women’s freedom, and has also stimulated their needs and interests through media consumption.

Gill’s work examines the trajectory of contemporary articulations of gender in the media. The distinctive element of her sensibility analysis demonstrates how women engage in and construct fashion and beauty with freely chosen individualisation and empowerment in contemporary neoliberalism, and how using women’s bodies destabilises pressures of sex and sexualisation in the media. For example, girls and young women engage in clothing practices through empowerment of sexy, cool and chic clothes purchasing as stylish identity, but disavow a feminist identity (Gill, 2011; Scharff, 2013). Wearing contemporary fashion garments rearticulates women agency and pleasures (Jackson, Vares, and Gill, 2012). This helps us to understand how women are portrayed as active and self-sexual subjects defying the male gaze, how they are able to bring self-presentation not only to their bodies but also to their selves, how

they can be themselves and please themselves in terms of gender and gender relations in their own right, and how women attack with the power of irony.

Alongside this, globalisation and the free-market economy have greatly influenced the national and cultural barriers between Thailand and Laos and the socioeconomic environment in Lao society. Under the influence of a capitalist value such as consumerism which firstly and widely manifest in western society, free choice in marriage, cohabitation, and gender equality, young Lao women are likely to embrace the contemporary lifestyles portrayed in Thai television soap operas. They develop aspects of Western values and practices in order to achieve their aspirations in terms of their sense of cultural identity, aspirations that are deemed entirely alien to socialist state cultural policy, social traditions, and traditional female values.

In other words, McRobbie's (2008, 2009) and Gill's (2007) works provide a theoretical foundation with which to explore how the contemporary liberated woman is portrayed in capitalism and how the media represents and shapes women's individualisation, choices, and freedom through postfeminist sentiment, which influences young women's aspirations in terms of body, family, and sexuality. McRobbie and Gill insist that TV shows and other entertainment media are not able to create feminist values involving women's liberation, equity, and equality. The portrayals of women's success in the media offer a hidden power behind the norms of patriarchal society, so that women seem not to be aware of their gender's inequality. A turning point in feminism is the disarticulation from media images: women have walked straight into a trap of consumer culture.

2.4.1 Women's empowerment in consumerist culture

In a consumerist culture, highlighting the stylish, beautiful, youthful women of magazines, pop music videos, TV shows, and advertising is signified as the supreme way to help women boost their confidence. Women's roles and socioeconomic status correspond with the pleasures of consumption in various ways: through postfeminist fashion, in which "fashion articulates a postfeminist ideology through notions of empowerment via sexuality and consumption" (Jackson, Vares, and Gill, 2012, p. 143); through a desire for white skin; through their engagement with body image; and through cosmetic surgery. This section explores these phenomena, drawing on the work of McRobbie (1997, 2007, 2008), Gill (2007, 2016), Tincknell (2011), and Luo (2013) as theoretical accounts to examine further Lao women's consumerist notions of choice in this study.

Firstly, young women in the mainstream media have their own desires to engage with the new styles of clothing and adornment. The habits of female dress and fashionable clothing show them as sexually empowered, self-confident and pleasure-driven (Jackson *et al.*, 2012), and also as liberated women (Mosmann, 2016), since women negotiate their independence and agency through fashionable clothes to construct class, gender relations, and identity (Walseth, 2006; Sandikci and Ger, 2010; Crane, 2012; Entwistle, 2015). This is evident in the female participants on television programmes such as *What Not to Wear* (BBC, 2001–2007), the UK version of a makeover reality TV show. Such programmes make over women’s appearances with fashionable clothes, displaying the ideals of consumerism and the sexualised body, connected to their transformed gender individualisation as well as their displays of class, power and success (McRobbie, 2004; Bulakh, 2015).

Furthermore, Gill (2016) suggests the concept of “celebrity and style feminism” (p. 618) to show the disconnection between the widespread feminist values of stylish celebrities in magazines and long-standing feminist concerns about anti-racism. She argues that wearing a T-shirt with the word ‘feminism’ is not the identity for being a feminist. This is also associated with brand consumer culture, in which clothes and matching accessories with handbags and shoes presented by celebutantes become desirable products (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Indeed, the mainstream media posing fashion and celebrity bodies appears to contradict the existing social reality, which women have confronted the problematic gender inequality (Gill, 2016).

One of the main problems with ‘the West’ is that much research on women’s consumption of fashion and beauty is dominated by western values. The yearning for the West with post-feminism is seen as a transnationalised culture to non-Western women who stand on the side of freedom from media consumption (Hegde, 2011; Chen, 2012; Dosekun, 2015). McRobbie (2007) also states that this posited ‘post-feminism’ culture can be seen among global south women when she states that “The global girl, like her western counterpart, is able to enjoy at least some of the rewards of the feminine consumer culture” (2012, pp. 733–734). As feminist scholars have identified that consumer demand for fashion and beauty circuits in the West are omnipresent.

There is a similar pattern of consumer discourse in the obsession with whiteness by non-Western women. The ideals of feminine beauty have captured postfeminist scholars’ interest because of their requirement for women to not only be thin, youthful, seductive, and sexy, but also to be white (Bartky, 1990; Wolf, 1990; Bordo, 2004; Evans *et al.*, 2010). One popular

female ideal is that of a pristine skin or a white complexion, which is seen as boosting attractiveness and confidence (Hill, 2002; Lewis, 2011), the enjoyment of privileges (Williams, 2010), and social class and status (Esposito, 2011). Skin colour is an increasingly important issue for women who seek individualisation and a privileged life. Skin-lightening products and other beauty treatments that are advertised on television also display images of what is currently regarded as perfect skin (Kenway and Bullen, 2011), which is commodified in the powerful ideal of the female body.

In addition, the study of whiteness in India is framed by the racial politics of beauty. Indian women equate the skin tone of Caucasian people with power; hence, advertisements for whitening products in India reveal women's desires not only to be ethnically white, but to be racially white European people (Parameswaran and Cardoza, 2009). The Indian women's desire for the light complexion is not the only relevant issue for women of different ethnicity and class, but also the impact of consumer society driven by globalisation. Hubert Prolongeau, a journalist for *Le Monde*, explains this situation as whiteness rooted in Indian caste and culture still seizing and sustaining because of the media portrayals of celebrities such as Bollywood stars who are the presenters of whitening products (*The Guardian*, 2015). He also posits that a marketing of brightening creams is encouraged to cultivate the sense that attractive women need to have a paler complexion.

The yearning of non-white consumers for a light skin colour is closely connected with marketing communication "as a form of symbolic capital" (Glenn, 2008, p. 281). Evidently, Indian, African, Latin American, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Filipino, European, and South American women's desires for cosmetic whitening creams are increasingly being fuelled by magazines, television advertisements, and programmes (Dixon, 2006; Watson *et al.*, 2010), all of which construct heroines, gender roles, and racial categorisation in girls and women (Thompson and McDonald 2016). Similarly, in Laos, whiteness as a beauty value signals superiority among non-white people (Goon and Craven, 2003; High, 2004).

Thirdly, Lazar (2011, p. 37) notes that "doing beauty is a vital component of doing femininity", and Coleman (2008) has found that most British female adolescents aspire to be very good-looking with an attractive figure. The desire to attain beauty goals in terms of having the 'perfect figure' in order to be successful and feel superior to others is evident in different minority ethnic backgrounds, including White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian women (Patton, 2006; Swami *et al.*, 2010). Gill (2007) includes the dimension of socioeconomic status in her research into female

body ideals of being slim and pretty, which are created in discourses on individualisation, choice, and empowerment. When young women enhance the importance of their looks, they become less assertive if they fail to achieve the ideal figure inspired by thin media images (Grabe *et al.*, 2008; Harper and Tiggemann, 2008; Featherstone, 2010). This raises the question: how do female protagonists on Thai television soap operas inspire Lao women viewers regarding consumption, in terms of fashion, beauty, and body? My research will return to this question later.

The media portrayal of a slim body seen as a hallmark of physical attractiveness impact on women's perception of body shape ideals (Owen and Laurel - Seller, 2000; Murnen *et al.*, 2003; Khan *et al.*, 2011). A number of quantitative studies have examined the negative effects of the images of beauty promoted in the media and advertising associated with "women's body-focused anxiety" (Halliwell and Dittmar, 2004, p. 104), body shame (Monro and Huon, 2005), ageing anxiety (Slevec and Tiggemann, 2010), and "self-esteem and satisfaction with weight" (Wilcox and Laird, 2000, p. 278). Westernised television programmes representing thinness among women in Fiji have resulted in an increase in young women buying into Western styles of appearance and the ethos of work on the body (Becker, 2004). In addition, women in East Asia and Southeast Asia show statistically significant levels of body dissatisfaction correlating with media exposure (Swami *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, an increase in body image disorders has been observed in Chinese adolescents (Xu *et al.*, 2010).

There is an assumption by academics in media literacy research that women understand that such body ideals are not real, yet they still experience negative ideas and a loss of power (Yamamiya *et al.*, 2005; Halliwell, 2013). Some women refuse to conform to the standardised model of thin beauty and choose to live happily and confidently with larger body shapes and a refusal of fat shame, as can be seen in the images of some media celebrities; for example, women such as Patricia Mann are recognised as "simple fat and simple women" (LeBesco, 2004, p. 10), and Beyoncé's body contests the thinness and whiteness ideals (Weidhase, 2015). Resistance to the thinness ideal is also critiqued in nuanced research about media literacy, which educates adolescents about the representation of body image in the mainstream media (Vares *et al.*, 2011).

Contemporary women with body-ideal messages define beauty ideals and act in ways that support their choices, roles, status, and class equality in their negotiation of identity. The stereotypical body image varies in female perspectives and beauty performances. Similarly,

McRobbie (2004) argues that an unfixing of the traditional gender role is an important message for women and therefore it is not necessary for women to be passive and dependent on men. Her work corresponds with Butler (1995), who contends that gender identification is performative and is “produced as a ritualized repetition of convention” (p. 31). Therefore, a woman’s body image is also performative and there is not a fixed shape of factual beauty to be achieved, but rather performances of beauty to fit (or not) the constructed ideal. The process of performativity thus mirrors women’s agency without the pressure to conform to gender norms (Butler, 2010).

Fourthly, and last, another so-called improvement in the construction of women’s choices and individualisation is body transformation. As Evans *et al.* (2010) state, “postfeminist sentiment has tightened the relationships between femininity and body work” (p. 3). This idea moves away from the notion that women wish to be beautiful to please men; rather, they are free agents, women with their own desires, amounting to a neoliberal version of femininity. The interaction of makeover programmes with empowering experience emphasises a type of postfeminist body construction that supports this and enhances the usage of cosmetic surgery as a feminine beauty practice (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008; Davis, 2009; Tincknell, 2011; Luo, 2013).

Women’s quests for surgical beautification are a contested terrain in feminist works on women’s engagement with cosmetic surgery (Davis, 1995, 2009). Davis criticises cosmetic surgery for women as having a limited offer for women’s agency. He views agency as “the active participation of individuals in the constitution of social life” (2009, p. 39). Estella Tincknell (2011) makes the makeover show *Ten Years Younger* a point of contention for women’s agency: she argues that a perfect body is misinterpreted as meaning women’s autonomy. Perhaps women’s agency is not the only driving force for body alterations among non-Western women. As Wei Lou (2013) states, modern Chinese women’s accounts show that their participation in cosmetic surgery is signified by conspicuous consumption for upgrading professional life in a hierarchical society, ascending social class, and gender politics.

Cosmetic surgery is a type of consumption that reflects a person’s purchasing power and social status (Hopkins, 2007) and is particularly pertinent to the female body. In other words, cosmetic surgery enforces body alterations for women in consumerist capitalism as a way of repositioning themselves in relation to class hierarchy, agency, and embodied identity (Braun, 2009; Taylor, 2012), generally as a result of the influence of Western media (Gill, 2007). For example, American middle-class women aged 24–50 years with self-determination undergo

cosmetic surgery as a reward to themselves for working hard (Gimlin, 2007), while most women in South Korea who have cosmetic surgery do so in order to negotiate national identity and as part of a discourse of globalised and regionalised standards of beauty, and to obtain the virtuous femininity ideology of upper-class women (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012).

Public attitudes towards cosmetic surgery have become increasingly positive as a result of women's understandable and self-chosen investment in their bodies. This supports the acceptance of cosmetic surgery in television programmes, as seen in Gill's (2007) research into the makeover paradigm in Western countries. This idea works to convince female viewers that their lives are flawed and could be positively transformed by undergoing cosmetic surgery. Makeover television programmes positively correlate with viewers' desires to undergo cosmetic procedures (Nabi, 2009). For example, research on Australian women aged 25–53 years shows that their exposure to four makeover TV programmes (*Extreme Makeover*, *Embarrassing Bodies*, *The Doctors*, and *How to Look Good Naked*) can be a strong motivation for their pursuit of improvements to their appearances via cosmetic surgery (Sharp, Tiggemann and Matisse, 2014).

Similarly, young people's inclinations towards cosmetic surgery are influenced by their exposure to positive messages about it in the media (Henderson-King and Henderson-King, 2005): online media constructs the self-perceived need for cosmetic surgery (Vardanian *et al.*, 2013) and contains many advertisements for cosmetic surgery (Chrisler *et al.*, 2012). As a result, the cosmetic surgery industry, both domestic and tourist-driven, is booming in South Korea and Thailand (Wilson, 2011), and Bangkok has become a mecca for female ideal surgery (Aizura, 2009). The trade in cosmetics in both East Asia and Southeast Asia reflects the milieu of consumer behaviours and gender ideologies (Heyes and Jones, 2009). This impacts Lao people, as evidenced in Lao female consumers in Savannakhet, Thailand, who cross the Laos–Thailand border in order to access cosmetic surgery: the influence of Thai media is a factor in constructing their body modification aspirations (Krileardmanon, 2014). Interestingly, the case of cosmetic surgery in Laos provides a situation of consumerism where media images, gender politics, and social aspirations intersect, an area which has not yet been fully investigated.

2.4.2 Women, cultural capital and class distinctions in cultural tastes

This section presents the concept of 'cultural capital' introduced by Pierre Bourdieu to contextualise women in relation to different social groups in their consumption. In feminist

perspectives, women are able to improve their roles and status through educational and employment achievements, associated with labour-market migration.

Bourdieu (1984) argued that cultural capital is a key tool for understanding class inequality in society since “conceiving of cultural capital as a familiarity with the culture of the dominant class, understood as high-brow tastes, dispositions, and practices engaged in by the upper classes and professionals” (Davies and Rizk, 2018, p. 337). The upper classes can possess three forms of cultural capital: first, concrete objects, or ‘objectified cultural capital’; second, educational institutions, or ‘institutionalized cultural capital’; third, patterns of behaviour, knowledge, and taste, or ‘embodied cultural capital’ (Spence *et al.*, 2017). In this study, Pierre Bourdieu’s signature concept of ‘cultural capital’ in terms of class hierarchies helps to differentiate between elite cosmopolitan social groups in Lao and the transnationalism of working-class Lao women who live in Laos, but regularly work in bars in Thailand.

Bourdieu (1984) also noted that elites have a ‘taste of luxury’ and a ‘taste of freedom’, whereas limited incomes restrict working-class groups to a ‘taste of necessity’. Examples of taste of luxury include taking good care of one’s health, being in good shape, buying expensive items, and other patterns of behaviour which indicate a clear distinction between rich people and other social classes. In other words, in consumer culture the possession of cultural capital and taste among upper-class elite groups is a primary marker to maintain differentiation between social classes.

In addition, luxury possessions which upgrade a group’s status and prestige are seen as a pattern of economic behaviour, or ‘conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899). The concept of conspicuous consumption has been taken up in academic debates about consumer choice, freedom and citizenship in ‘consumer citizenship’ discourse, in which young people also significantly partake (Miles, 2015). Cosmopolitan lifestyles offered by consumerism in neo-liberal forms of citizenship relate to the relationship of consumers and dutiful citizens to the State (Riley, More, and Griffin, 2010). For example, Chinese middle-class professionals, as daughters and consumer-citizens, purchase a car as “a status symbol and a vehicle for individual freedom”, for the happiness and wealth of family members and for the state economy (Zhang, 2017, p.57).

In this study, it can be argued that there is a group of young Lao women as an audience who hold cultural capital and are able to purchase expensive products to express their class status.

Their aspirations and lifestyles may be labelled conspicuous consumption, and they may become consumer-citizens to improve their status and drive economic growth through the realm of consumption. Essentially, their transnational Thai television soap opera viewing may partly increase the Lao women's need for the modern and extravagant lifestyles portrayed by female characters. In contrast, the majority of Lao middle-aged and elderly working-class women do not find themselves in the financial position to purchase luxury goods and global brands (fashionable clothes, houses, cars), and hence they can only aspire to a modern lifestyle in consumer society.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed national contexts of cultural globalisation in Laos today. Firstly, it has identified the influence of cultural globalisation of media on Laotians. With the Lao economic reform policy launched in 1986, and still in force at present, Lao society has been transformed at a considerable pace, and national identity politics is replacing socialism with the expansion of the market capitalist economy. In this context, the growth of the economy in urbanised society relates to sociocultural transformation and a diversity of livelihoods, which are changing Laotians' lifestyles. However, Lao media, and in particular Lao television, also acts as a hegemonic force to disseminate beneficial and positive information to the population, and to promote and protect national culture and security through state control of what the media shows. Due to the limitations in the quality of home-produced TV entertainment programmes, Laotians have been selecting and watching Thai TV as cross-border and cross-cultural media for more than 20 years. Therefore, Thai TV has played an important role in Laotians' lifestyles, and the Lao government sees Thai media as being contaminated with Western concepts.

Alongside a paradoxical interplay between politics and the mass media, state resistance to Thai television is clear in its attempts to protect Lao culture and identity through media censorship and cultural policies. This has resulted, for example, in Lao women not being allowed to wear trousers or skirts, or any kind of clothing that is contrary to Lao traditions. In this, Lao women are regarded as the catalyst for cultural changes in the era of globalisation. In the meantime, women's choices, individualisation and freedom occur in their modern lives (Giddens, 1992), bringing about the detraditionalisation of values and cultures in Lao society. The dichotomy between the changes among young women in existing social relations and women's images in popular culture has distorted the shape of feminism. Young women in the mainstream media represent their self-identity by dressing up in fashionable clothes, enhancing their beauty and

body image, and by undergoing cosmetic surgery in order to boost self-confidence and become accustomed to privilege life.

This thesis will now go on to investigate the way Lao female viewers negotiate and interpret media messages of Thai TV soap operas and the cultural policy and measures of the Lao government to maintain their national and cultural identity. The following chapter provides a body of literature on women as audiences for TV shows, and on media effect theories, in order to understand female audience consumption, women's cross-cultural consumption, and to examine how women audiences use media in terms of pleasure and interpretations of media messages in their everyday lives.

Chapter 3. Women Television Audiences and Media Effects

3.1 Introduction

A critical review of the existing literature on audience studies and media effects theories in TV research helps to examine women's everyday lives in their consumption and interpretation of audiovisual texts. Both women television audiences and media effects are employed to answer my research question: what pleasures do Lao women derive from watching Thai soap operas? In this chapter, media effects theories provide a more comprehensive engagement with audience analysis in order to understand the effect of women's cross-cultural TV consumption in shaping their attitudes to and social behaviours in modern life. The media effects theories and women as audiences for soap operas and other TV shows provide an appropriate framework for exploring the influence of TV on female audience's changing cultural identities, which in turn identifies the key concepts and approaches relevant to my thesis. Consequently, this chapter starts with a brief introductory discussion of media effects theories in order to illustrate the study of media effects and our conceptualisation of audiences, as well as to explain the role of the media at both an individual and societal level.

Laos shares a 1,835 kilometres border with Thailand, yet the reasoning behind Lao audiences' consumption of their neighbouring country's TV soap operas is complex and more dynamic than a simple geographic matter. It also relates to Lao women's distinctive tastes and socio-political and economic status and situation. This chapter also overviews the 'uses and gratifications' approach to explore the general trend of the Thai TV viewing habits of Lao women in terms of their own satisfaction and pleasures. Specifically, it offers an in-depth examination of the nature of active audiences using the 'encoding-decoding approach' proposed by Stuart Hall (1980) in order to investigate the impact of Thai TV soap operas on Lao female viewers' sense of cultural identity. In this way, audiences' receptions in their everyday lives – their interpretations in terms of incorporated, negotiated or resisted audiovisual text – recur in these discussions. In addition to facilitating research and exploration of the subject area, these two approaches enable this research to provide broader generalising abstractions and reliable and valid findings in audience research in TV studies (Wood, 2015).

The audience is one of the principal elements of media studies. It has also become a major field in which questions about the effects of the media are vigorously debated. A significant number of empirical studies have investigated the question of viewing activities in terms of audience cooperation and resistance (Seaman, 1992; Morley, 1993; Dahlgren, 1997). The focus in my study is associated with women TV viewers because TV is unique in its centralised mass-production and the art of images and messages created to attract the mass of consumers (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). Despite the invention and expansion of new technologies, the massive increase in satellite and cable TV channels since the 1970s has ensured that TV, for the moment, remains the principal disseminator of stories and messages diffusing across frontiers of class, gender, race, age, region, geography, ethnicity, and sexuality. This chapter discusses the concept of the audience and its position in the context of cross-cultural TV consumption.

This chapter also reviews the relevant literature on women as audiences who are affected by watching TV soap operas and other shows. The construction of social identity through the lens of TV consumption significantly creates the mindsets and thoughts of women viewers in everyday life. Since TV messages as cultural artefacts mostly present consumer cultures, ideals of beauty, and gendered roles of women in love and intimate relationships, to women viewers (Nabi and Keblusek, 2014; Ozgun, Yurdakul, and Atik, 2017), the section ‘Women as audiences for TV shows’ sets out to illustrate some of the ways in which women as audiences construct the cultural meanings of TV messages in the social contexts of consumption. To be more precise, this section helps to analyse how contemporary Lao women negotiate and approach modernity in their personal lives through their consumption of Thai TV soap operas.

Essentially, the study of Thai soap narratives provides an enhanced comprehension of the extent to which soap opera messages are transmitted to the audience. The ideologies, female character creations, and plots of Thai soap operas are the main elements giving women as an audience direction to their ways of life in contemporary society. The section ‘Television soap opera narrative forms: the case of Thai TV soaps’, therefore illustrates the hybridity of local and global values that has been produced and established in Thai soap operas presented to regional audiences. For example, the female protagonists’ behaviours introduce their lessons of life with a proliferation of certain lifestyles to viewers, and the plots about family and gender issues initiate socio-cultural transformation in viewers. This chapter hence facilitates investigation into the influence of Thai TV soap operas on Lao female viewers’ attitudes and behaviours and provides part of the theoretical framework for the empirical chapters which follow.

3.2 The continuum of media effects theories

This section mainly provides an overview of active audience and the process of data interpretation, which lead to argue the extent of the power of the media to influence. The early media effects theory has evolved from a rather simplistic view of the audience as ‘passive consumer’ to a more complicated and multifaceted picture in which the audience are part of the meaning-making process – co-constructors - in their consumption of media (Williams, 2013). My thesis challenges the view that media render audiences powerless and vulnerable; on the contrary, audiences may be empowered by television (Gillespie, 2009). Especially, the incorporation of uses and gratifications and Hall (1982)’s encoding-decoding model in this thesis is much more appropriate than the effects research.

There are signs of a growing media effect on culture and the power of audiences in the creation of meaning. New audience research and reception theory has been influenced by Stuart Hall’s encoding-decoding model (1980), in which audiences are ‘free’ to interpret media messages. Scholars have attempted to identify the factors that shape viewers’ interpretations and understandings of the messages, relying on in-depth interviews focused on media consumption habits (Ang, 1996; Curran, 1996; Morley, 1996). Hall’s model introduces a shift in the media effects debate by positing that the influence of the media depends on viewers’ interpretations and thought processes. For example, Hobson (1982) emphasises the active audience engaged in meaning-making while consuming the British soap opera *Crossroads*; Ang (1985) shows how Dutch women make their own meanings when watching the American soap *Dallas*; and the work of these two feminist scholars has challenged the assumptions of direct negative media effects on women’s media consumption.

Reception analysis in media studies inserts the notion of pleasures into the discussion of what audiences gain from their soap opera viewings. Ang (1996) states that the pleasure women gain from soap operas actively constructs meanings that undermine the power and authority of media messages. Women as audience restrict the values and ideology of cultural forms and popular media. Therefore, the encoding-decoding approach and reception studies argue that the interpretative activity of audiences is politically significant. To develop that line of thought in this study, the ‘encoding-encoding’ model for investigating their interpretation of TV soap meanings to explore Lao women’s Thai cross-cultural television consumption, in particular, of soap operas programmes, and the ‘uses and gratifications’ approach for examining Lao female viewers’ pleasures and TV viewing are jointly adopted.

3.3 Uses and gratifications approach

The ‘uses and gratification’ approach is used to assess media motives and the psychological needs met for individuals and the effects thereof (Rubin, 2009). This section reviews this approach and its application to varied media in order to consider why and how Lao women watch Thai TV and in particular, Thai soap operas. The uses and gratifications approach is adopted in this research to explore Lao women’s media use, the tendencies in Lao behaviour and TV viewing, the objectives of media use and the trends of media impact on Lao women. In addition to the proximity and cultural dominance of its neighbour, Lao audiences naturally have their own reasons for their consumption of and interest in TV broadcasts from Thailand. ‘Uses and gratifications’ hence lays the foundations, in the form of motives, satisfactions and pleasures, of a way to understand Lao contemporary women’s TV viewing in my study.

The concept of satisfaction is relevant to TV viewers and their pleasures. Satisfaction is central to media use and reflects the motivations and involvement of viewers’ TV viewing (Lin, 1993; Godlewski and Perse, 2010). In fact, satisfaction is linked to pleasure, or pleasant experiences, which are transmitted through the entertainment value of content (Busselle and Bilandzic, 2008). It assumes we engage in or take pleasure in certain kinds of dramatic and emotional narratives portrayed in female images or protagonists as a symbolic reference to women’s struggle in reality (Spence, 2005). In my study, therefore, the ‘uses and gratification’ approach is employed to explore the interplay between Lao female viewers and Thai TV soap opera viewing, to explore their negotiations of satisfactions and pleasures.

Historically, the ‘uses and gratifications’ approach was developed by Katz, Blumer and Gurevitch (1974) to understand the reasoning behind individuals’ use of the media and the positive and negative effects of their media use. Similarly, Wright (1974), a functionalist in the field of sociology, defined the media as responding to various needs in our daily life; for example, the general audience can receive cohesion, social security, cultural continuity, and obtain a variety of public information for our guidance, alteration, relaxation, and identity building. The approach also focuses on communication behaviour and its consequences, the background of audiences, and, in particular, the direct experiences of the media audience, since their emotions and social conditions influence their choice of media (Katz *et al.*, 1974; Rubin, 2009). For example, McQuail (1987) finds media uses fulfil individual personal needs in relation to the requirements of “information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment [as well as] escaping from problems, relaxing, getting intrinsic cultural or

aesthetic enjoyment, filling time, emotional release and sexual arousal” (p.73). Contemporary researchers who apply the ‘uses and gratification’ approach in studies of the media are interested in underlying factors such as gratification, needs, objectives, benefits, media effects and personal choices (Rubin, 2009).

Much of the existing literature adopting the ‘uses and gratification’ approach has been updated since the 1970s to address people’s use of the new technologies in television consumption. The emergence of digitalisation and the global sharing of information supports a shift in television consumption from traditional TV to online TV (Portilla, 2015). Audiences still enjoy watching TV programmes via television sets and also selecting to watch TV content via mobile TV (Choi, Kim and McMillan, 2009), YouTube (Burgess and Green, 2009) and social TV websites (Pagani and Mirabello, 2011). The digital technologies today provide more viewing channels, platforms and time, which affect audience measurements in terms of behaviours or TV viewing practices (Taneja and Mamoria, 2012). For example, TV viewers in Belgium watch fictional American TV series with different TV viewing styles (watching through live broadcast television, the digital video recorder (DVR), downloading and DVD viewing (Simons, 2013), and Chinese transnational audience watch Japanese TV dramas through websites with Chinese subtitles and purchase pirated VCD (Hu, 2006).

One notable technological aspect of my study is digital electronics, which have facilitated consumption of TV soap operas beyond borders. The digitalisation of screen and media viewing reinforces my assumption: young Lao women in Vientiane are able to watch TV soap operas online on iPads, laptops and smart phones as alternative screens, in contrast to many women living in rural areas who continue watching TV soaps via satellite and cable TV. Accessing media content from advanced technological devices is rising rapidly and having a significant impact on the development of relationships and friendships (Bolton *et al.*, 2013; Whiting and Williams, 2013). Therefore, an examination of the impact and role of social and mobile media as opportunity vehicles for viewing Thai TV in my study may afford novel insights into new patterns of how Lao women behave as an audience today, which the digital technology devices may enable to tie their family connections.

TV viewing experience often involves social interaction. Livingstone (2013) notes that the widening of the emotional boundaries between family members relates to their media use. In this context, media use is often dominated by common complex family rules that depend on the family’s behaviour (Morley, 1986). Moreover, social TV viewing via the Internet relates to

social enhancement (Torrez-Riley, 2011; Kim, Song, and Lee, 2017). This leads to changing TV viewing experiences, an idea that will be revisited in the discussion of the different socio-economic groups of Lao urban and rural women.

However, the ‘uses and gratification’ approach cannot fully comprehend a viewer’s understanding and explanation of media texts. The ‘uses and gratification’ approach can provide a lens through which to investigate the reasoning behind individuals’ uses of various types of media even as it is lacking the ability to provide insights into the media texts consumed. Wood (2015) argues that the ‘uses and gratification’ approach does not seek to compare analyses of content with analyses of audience reception. Similarly, Elliott (1974) argues that ‘uses and gratification’ is imprecise and lacks a prior social theory and is therefore unable to provide sufficient evidence about how people consume media in a wider social context. Therefore, the focus of the ‘uses and gratification’ approach is on personal behaviour rather than wider societal behaviour. Due to these limitations, my study also draws on Stuart Hall’s encoding-decoding approach to examine how Lao women consume and interpret Thai soaps.

Hall (1982) rejects theories of traditional media effects or the direct influence of media texts on people. His model “moves away from a behaviouristic stimulus-response model to an interpretive framework where all effects depend on an interpretation of media messages” (Alasuutari, 1999, p. 3). In the following section, the ‘encoding-decoding’ model is outlined as a potential framework for investigating the influence of Thai soap operas on Lao women’s sense of identity and their cultural life. The extent to which Thai female protagonists inspire Lao women viewers regarding consumption in terms of fashion, beauty, and body, and relationships, and therefore the extent to which Thai TV soap operas impact on women’s agency and individualisation with regards to gender equality and modern relationships, is a further pertinent issue to be explored. The social practices of Lao women audiences watching Thai television soap operas and meanings in televisual discourse are critically assessed by Hall’s model.

3.4 The encoding-decoding approach

My thesis draws on Stuart Hall’s (1980) encoding-decoding model as it is deemed an appropriate framework for revealing Lao women’s interpretations of the meaning of soap opera texts in their lives. The communication process in relation to the construction (encoding), transmission (generation of meaning) and reception (decoding) of messages suggests that coded

media messages will be decoded by audiences in different ways in different contexts. The communication process of sender-message-receiver will always mean that there are gaps between the intended meaning of a message from the sender to how it is understood by the receiver because the messages will be interpreted by the audiences with reference to their identity and life experiences. In other words, interpretation depends on a range of personal characteristics such as background, experience, education level, occupation, economic situation, political position, gender, social class, ideological beliefs, and so on.

Hall's original thesis adopts Umberto Eco's (1972) work and explains that receivers can decode media texts by using their own interpretation of what they mean, so that texts are thus considered to be polysemic in meaning. However, the producers of texts have already attempted to encode them with particular meanings through the use of iconic signs that intend to shape the receiver's perception. This is an essential attribute for the analysis: taste, value systems and ideology are transmitted in society by understanding the broad social structure, not individual needs. According to Hall (1980), audiences decode or read media texts in three ways: a dominant reading, also known as preferred reading, occurs when audiences respond to the message as the sender intends; a negotiated reading occurs when the audiences both agree and disagree with the message as a result of their values and socio-cultural experiences; an oppositional reading occurs when the audience rejects or resists the dominant meaning.

It is helpful to consider the communication process of sender-message-receiver in terms of a circuit of media production and consumption related to *capital* (ie. the labour process). Importantly, "if no meaning is taken, there can be no consumption" (Hall, 2006, p. 164). Hall (2006, p. 165) explained this process by borrowing Marxist terms:

Circulation and reception are, indeed, moments of the production process in television and are reincorporated, via a number of skewed and structured 'feedbacks', into the production process itself. The consumption or reception of the television message is thus also itself a moment of the production process in its larger sense, though the latter is 'predominant' because it is the 'point of departure for the realization' of the message.

The reception of the televisual texts (decoding meaning structures) therefore relates to the production of television messages (encoding meaning structure). In this sense, Hall's model (encoding-decoding model) may be usefully combined with an understanding of cultural capital. In the way Lao female viewers' different classes (following Marx's notion) watch Thai television soap operas, they may compromise their aspirations to acquire goods due to their limited income or refuse to accept the consumption messages because of an ideological refusal

to accept that consuming is a good thing to do; in other words, they literally refuse to accept capitalism.

Baran and Davis (1980, 2013) have further interrogated Hall's meaning categories of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional, particularly in terms of ethnographic traditions. Dominant/hegemonic codes or preferred readings are produced by viewers who completely concur with the ruling elites' ideology and interpret TV meanings encoded in the content by the TV apparatus (producers, directors, and scriptwriters). Negotiated readings or codes come from viewers who express personal understandings of content that are different, to a certain extent, from the preferred reading. Oppositional readings or codes are produced when TV viewers can analyse the pros and cons in the content's interpretation and their opinions are opposed to a dominant reading. Hence, the process of decoding soap operas allows us to understand the varied social contexts through which the audience receives the texts. My study echoes a typology of issues concerning 'preferred', 'negotiated' and 'oppositional' readings of understandings of soap operas to ascertain what they tell us about Lao female audiences' consumption of TV cross-border media.

Similarly, Ross and Nightingale (2003) state that audiences are active formations rather than individuals. In the process of receiving the media text, the audiences engage in a decoding of that text, or a 'reading' of its content that makes it meaningful or pleasurable in the act of consumption or use. This idea of meaning interpretation is relevant to the pattern of audience response towards the impact of media discourses, referred to as "selective perception, which is almost never as selective, random or privatised as the concept suggests" (Hall, 1980, p. 135). Audiences tend to think, read and understand media messages based on their personal socio-economic backgrounds. The degree of interpretation in decoding media texts depends upon the social class background of people and their daily lives (Ross and Nightingale, 2003). Therefore, the socio-cultural situatedness of viewers produces different interpretations of media messages, involving acceptance, negotiation, and rejection. They extend the encoding-decoding approach's claim that audiences are involved in

accepting, negotiating or rejecting the ideas advocated by the media. The activity of accepting, rejecting or negotiating was thought of less as the activity of individuals, and more as an activity through which culture in general, and the particular cultural location of the respondent in particular, was expressed. The meaning of the programme or cultural work was theorized as incomplete until the audience had both consumed and reproduced it in a way that makes

sense within the contexts of everyday life. (Ross and Nightingale, 2003, p. 37)

The encoding of media texts also consolidates the structural media organisation, corporate cultures, production methods, technical equipment, and the relations of production to a variety of media forms such as TV drama (Hall, 1980). In this production process, Hall argues that the production of media texts is encoded with dominant meanings in order that it can reach an audience. The meanings must be meaningful or align themselves to audience expectations about what constitutes a media text that they would wish to consume. This demonstrates that meanings and socio-cultural power or discourses, rather than the individual needs and gratifications of audiences, are dominant. The encoding-decoding model enables the provision of detailed interpretations of media texts. My thesis, therefore, makes use of this approach to examine how Lao women from different socio-economic groups in both urban and rural areas interpret or decode Thai television soap opera texts, in order to understand social and cultural structures in contemporary Laos.

One of the early users of the encoding-decoding model is Morley and Brunson's (1978) study of *Nationwide*, a BBC news programme. They find the different interpretations of this programme corresponded to different viewers' socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. For example, bank managers mostly decode the 'preferred meaning' and approved the style of the programme but also provide 'negotiated readings' of some parts of the programme, while black and working-class people provide 'oppositional readings'. Morley (1980, 1992) argues that an audience has attributes which are both active and passive at the same time. He promotes the integration of the analysed framework of text, which influences semiology theory, and the freedom of the audience, and he therefore suggests that media texts and audiences have to be analysed together. Since audiences have long absorbed a set of polysemous values and dominant messages from TV, this has an impact on their identity (Morley, 1980). Morley pays attention to both textual analysis and the examination of the sociology of TV; that is, the sociology of producers/senders and the sociology of audiences. His study of social response shows that audiences incorporated, negotiated or resisted the TV text in line with their socio-economic situation.

In addition, the model of decode-encode knowledge is followed by Hobson (1982), who shows that the moment of reading influences women viewers' opinions of the British soap opera *Crossroads*. She investigates how female audiences interacted with the TV show. Her findings advances Hall's model: the women in Hobson's study bring different readings to the

programme based on age, education level, income and cultural perspectives. Ang's (1985) work on the representation of women in the popular American television soap opera *Dallas*, using interviews with female Dutch viewers, demonstrates that many women TV viewers proffered preferred readings produced and indicated from the character Sue Ellen standing out as a heroine in whom they were emotionally invested. Yet Ang also notes that some female viewers resist the dominance of the Western media at the same time: they interpret Sue Ellen's life in a variety of ways, producing an oppositional reading of drama narratives. In short, female audiences enjoy watching *Dallas* and associate it with viewing pleasure and their own personal ideological outlooks. As Hobson (1982) and Ang (1985) note above, the way to understand women as an audience viewing soap opera programmes are clearly connected to their social and demographic changes.

Press (1991) also stresses identified class differences between American viewers: middle-class women seemed to apply a distanced viewing strategy or negotiate with the TV texts, while working-class women were likely to adopt a 'relational' viewing style connecting texts to their personal lives. In this event, white middle-class viewers who had careers became the new target demographic in the 1970s (D'Acci, 1994), replacing the housewife, who had long been the main target of TV production. This observation underpins my study in its approach to female Lao audience readings of Thai TV soaps, in particular the female characters' images and their own self-images. The assumptions are, presumably, that young Lao urban educated upper-class and middle-class women who have careers and income (acting as modernists) may incorporate female images of a freed lifestyle in forming their own sense of agency, self-satisfaction and social aspirations, whereas middle-aged working-class and rural women with limited choices in education and career advancement (acting as traditionalists) may negotiate with or resist the TV soaps portrayals of a female protagonist's extravagant lifestyle, beauty and modern relationships.

Brown (1994) finds that 'the pleasure that women experience when talking about soap operas and constructing their own spoken texts is often a resistive pleasure' (p.11). Young, urban Chinese middle-class women acquired pleasure from female protagonists who have empowered and 'liberated' lifestyles, which read against the prevailing social norms and conservative social structures Chinese women live within (Chang and Ren, 2016). Meanwhile, young Chinese female viewers prefer media texts "in ways less extreme, 'Western,' or 'tactless' than this TV show" (Chang and Ren, 2016, p. 578). These arguments demonstrate that an active audience can critique ('resist') the intended meanings of TV messages as much as incorporate the

dominant meanings of the TV series. TV soap operas are also discussed by Gillespie (1995), who examines peer culture in Southall, West London and discussed TV content in the Australian Soap *Neighbours*. Gillespie finds that not only did young viewers have experience of this soap content in terms of its relationships, but that they also negotiated relationships within and between Punjabi culture and British and American norms, which demonstrated their aspirations towards courtship and marriage.

A number of more contemporary researchers have found the similar themes in the ‘encoding-decoding’ paradigm when exploring the relationship between non-Western viewers and non-Western TV soaps. For example, Espiritu (2011) finds Filipino women watched Korean dramas through a ‘negotiation, resistance, and struggle’ interpretation framework and pointed out there was a strong desire for a luxury lifestyle but no desire for or in fact opposition to the individualism and liberalism portrayed by female protagonists of these TV series. The Filipino women’s receptions indicate that cultural backgrounds shape their reading of the messages of Korean dramas: young rural women with collectivist values prefer simplicity of lifestyle, young urban women from Catholic schools are confident with women’s empowerment, and middle-class women identify themselves with the hardworking female characters. The assumption of Espiritu’s research (2011) suggests that the education factor was most likely to have an impact on audiences’ articulations of the meanings of drama series. In this regard, I examine in the comparison of young, educated, urban Lao women, young rural and less-educated Lao women, and middle-aged, less-educated women in the countryside. The theoretical perspective on audience analysis developed by Hall’s encoding-decoding model is therefore echoed in my study.

To emphasise Lao women’s agency, self-satisfaction, and social aspirations through the lens of their consumption of Thai TV soaps and how this is contributing to novel emergent forms of identity, sociality and modernity in contemporary Lao society, a critical discussion of the impact on women of watching particular soap operas is discussed in Section 3.5.

3.5 Women as audiences for TV shows

According to Septrup (1989, 1990) there is a form of TV cross-border media transmission, called a bilateral form in which audiences consume unintended stories and messages across their national border. It can be considered as an example of the pour-over effect. Examples of such pour-over would be Canadian reception of American TV, Irish of British, Austrian of

German, and Lao of Thai, among others. Such audiences may not be intended or even wanted by the originating source and country, and the cultural impact is often disputed, as with Lao and Thailand and in other cases where small countries are overshadowed by larger neighbours sharing the same language. Hence, the cross-border media texts with geographical closeness of Thailand and Laos is a problematic case here since Thai TV signals spill over to Laos, meaning that Thai broadcasting is easily and widely received across Laos. As the power of TV to form and reform opinion and identity is an inherently political question, the Lao government is naturally concerned about the impact of Thai TV content on the country's cultural cohesion and, by extension, national security.

A number of countries in Asia present a strong case that regional and national media have more of an impact on identity formation and opinion than does global. For example, La Pastina and Straubhaar's study (2005) show how cultural proximity in relation to 'both geographical and cultural-linguistic boundaries' led TV viewers in Brazil to tend to watch Mexican soap operas. Thus the power of cultural similarities and the role of cultural structures, language and geography shape audiences (Consalvo, 2011). Similarly, audiences will consume media contents they are most comfortable with. For instance, audience in the South Asia region seem to remain loyal to Indian soap operas or Ramayan, with Western soap operas making minimal inroads (Burch, 2002). The cultural proximity concept, therefore, offers an analytical means to understand the applicability of Lao women's consumption of Thai TV soap operas.

Female viewers engaging in cross-cultural TV consumption often perceive a set of values and ideologies which clash with their conventional cultures and behavioural norms (Ross, 2012). Soap operas are one form of popular entertainment programme purposefully produced to appeal to women because the narratives often entail storylines and predicaments about women's lives in the real world, fuelled by images of desirable lifestyles (usually involving images of wealth beyond the average citizen's reach) and depictions of standardised notions of beauty and generally liberal attitudes towards gender roles (Geraghty, 1991, 2003). Therefore, the way in which audiences experience televisual messages and analyse their meanings makes it important to clarify and analyse whether those messages may or may not be having an impact on them. This also refers to the relationship between televisual texts, social contexts and audience reactions in negotiating between modernity and tradition.

A popular entertainment genre, TV soap operas are a cross-border and cross-cultural phenomenon that has been popular with women audiences for decades. Millions of women

across the globe are viewers of TV soap operas, exemplified by the cross-border popularity of Latin American telenovela soaps, US series, Turkish soap operas, and Korean drama series. A soap opera is an entertainment programme, a cultural product of melodramatic pleasure which shows models of success, desirability and hatred at the same time (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003; Iqbal and Abdar, 2016). Since such a high proportion of melodrama and romance involve leading female characters made to appeal to women audiences (Lynd and Lynd 1929; Ford, Kosnik and Harrington, 2011), soaps attract and incite women viewers and inspire their imaginations in everyday life through their storylines (Spence, 2005). More broadly, soaps have also been identified by scholars as crucial vehicles for disseminating the values of capitalist modernity and consumer culture (Brown, 1994; Chua and Iwabuchi, 2008), as well as becoming a “source of legitimate pleasure within and against patriarchy” (Fisk, 1987, p. 183). However, it should be noted that the reality is rather more complex than these observations suggest, as research on audience studies shows that female audiences’ attitudes and behaviours towards TV soap operas differ along class, age, and rural-urban lines. For example, the US schedule of sitcoms portrays afternoon slots for women as “ideal audience of stay-at-home housewives” and presents prime-time and late night slots for young urban educated and affluent women (Weissmann, 2013, p. 153).

Analysis of the pleasures gained from watching soap operas is substantial. Since pleasure is an important term in a transformed feminist cultural politics (Storey, 1999), pleasure is seen as a woman’s liberation impediment. As Ang (1985) argues, feminism may cease because “the paternalism of the ideology victims of the deceptive messages of soap operas...[their] pleasure...totally disregarded” (pp. 118-119). ‘It does, however, mean that, where cultural consumption is concerned, no fixed standard exists for gauging the “progressiveness” of a fantasy (p. 135). The personal may be political, but the personal and the political do not always go hand in hand” (p. 136). Liebes and Katz (1993) argue that women rather experience pleasures through a process of negotiation when watching soap operas, rather than “a process stimulus and response” (p. 4). In this situation, I am not convinced by the media and cultural imperialism thesis, as I note in chapter 2 that cultural hybridisation breaks with global homogenisation. The possibility of Lao women audiences from different socio-cultural backgrounds variously reading and interpreting Thai soaps texts in a probable negotiation of their understanding, one in which their pleasures are concurrently produced, may occur in my study. The ideological meanings in soap operas are confronted by the agency of television audiences (Buckingham, 1987).

Soaps are inflected by stereotypes and myths as well as portrayals of sexuality, violence, morality and capitalist ideals of money, social status and individuality. These characteristics of soap operas are designed to appeal to both younger women audiences through the development of “female characters who are always professional and otherwise powerful in the world outside the home” (Brown, 1987, p. 4), while also appealing to an older and more traditional female audiences (Frentz, 1992; Liebes and Livingstone, 1992; Greenberg and Busselle, 1996). Cross-border audiences make sense of soap operas as cultural products from a variety of perspectives and studies over the past decades clearly identify ambiguities in meaning-making. For example, many women viewers of different cultures and religions in Israel, America and Japan watched the highly popular *Dallas* with ambivalent and contradictory receptions and interpretations (Liebes and Katz, 1993). Well-educated Taiwanese women rejected the domesticity portrayed in Korean dramas and instead placed greater value on gender equality (Yang, 2008). Malay women negotiate the meanings of modernity in non-Western soap operas, which generates conflicts with the established Islamic, patriarchal order (Md Syed and Runnel, 2014).

Recent debates around women’s consumption of soap operas and the influence of consumer culture confirms the prevalent assumptions of a growing association between soaps and consumerist modernity (Geraghty, 1991; Hobson, 2003; Iwabuchi 2002; Spence, 2005). The values of capitalist modernity shown in soaps is an important site for exploring how female viewers engage with consumer culture. For example, Ozgun *et al.* (2017) claim that poor Turkish women acquired the representations of characters’ glamorous lifestyles and desired commodities, considering them as routes to happiness and empowerment. Jabbour (2017) argues that Turkish soap operas are transforming young female self-identification in the Middle East in terms of dressing and fashion styles, changes which are depicted by prevailing cultural norms as un-Islamic. Yang (2012) finds younger Chinese viewers were eager to consume and imitate Western lifestyles through characters’ appearance and mannerisms as portrayed in Korean dramas. All these studies concluded that cross-cultural or transnational soap opera content are significant agents of change in terms of women’s lifestyle, particularly where young female viewers are concerned.

On the other hand, Md Syed (2013) states that although Malay women derive pleasure from Asian soap operas which portrayed cosmopolitan lifestyles and images of female beauty, they nonetheless also maintain traditional Malay cultural conventions. It is also important to note that, despite their impact as change agents in culture, there is also some resistance to what are

considered the more ‘vulgar’ patterns of behaviour which appear to stand in more obvious and explicit contrast to local conventions and this is also discussed later in my thesis.

The influence of reality TV programmes and other TV shows on women’s sense of beauty has been a topic of many studies (Grabe *et al.*, 2008; Hardit and Hannum, 2012). Such research has often been interested in the influence of such media on adolescent girls’ concerns about their appearance and the propensity for cosmetic enhancement (Ashikali *et al.*, 2014). At the same time, female viewers in their 20s and 30s articulate “feelings of being stressed, burdened, and annoyed about the discourses in the shows which signify their (un) conscious acknowledgment of the false promises of the self-care rhetoric” (Lee and Lee, 2017, p. 250). A number of studies suggest that exposure to TV reality/competition shows has an impact on women’s bodily dissatisfaction and drives the desire for thinness and a concomitant growth in ‘body concern’ and which eating behaviours amongst women of all ages (English, 2014). It has been observed, for example, that the American TV series *Cougar Town* and *Desperate Housewives* portray female characters in their 40s with bodies more representative of women in their 20s (see Hefner *et al.*, 2014). These themes are further explored in Chapter 7.

The impact of TV soap opera consumption on the lifestyle changes of women is well-documented and researched in media and cultural studies. The varied effects on women’s behaviour, in particular their relationships and family values, show the role of soap operas as important in some women’s lives. For example, as societal and economic shifts in China produce increasing exposure to foreign TV programmes, growing numbers of younger Chinese women from traditional nuclear families (and family values based on traditional Confucian understandings) are tending to endorse ‘foreign’ values of individualistic relationships and cohabitation (Chen, 2015). Similarly, TV dating programmes can influence young Chinese women to reject traditional relationship ethics and view premarital sex, cohabitation and extramarital affairs in a less negative light (Yang, 2017).

Similar scenarios are being played out in India, where Banaji (2011) argues that the *saas-bahu* serial on Channel STAR translates into changing desires in the women. She studies female viewers in northern India living in urban areas, with an increased tendency to value the affluent and liberated lifestyles shown in soap operas while at the same time, they seek to manage their existing and traditional roles as housewives and mothers. Teenagers, however, seem to be less conflicted in terms of their values, and the same study reports that younger women are increasingly rejecting traditional values and family practices as a result of watching this soap.

These findings indicate that young women with more education are internalising individualised values which contrast with conventional cultural norms and patterns of behaviour. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of my study address the issue of urban-rural and educated/uneducated divides.

Another critical effect of TV drama series on women relates to gender and sexual identities. The Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black* (OITNB, 2013-2016) presents queer content and sexuality in New York to straight-identified viewers, with the female character Piper Chapman positioned as being both heterosexual (the story in the first scene) and lesbian (throughout most of the series) (Symes, 2017). A recent online survey of American viewers of TV series' storylines with gay and lesbian characters suggests that exposure to such storylines reduces homophobia (Gillig *et al.*, 2017). There is even a positive reaction amongst conservative viewers. Chapter 6 explores how the representation of LGBT characters and sexuality in Thai soaps affects viewers' notions of gender norms.

Similar situations can arise in the case of abortion, as seen in the American TV sitcom '*How I met your mother*'. This example is used by Swigger (2016) to conduct experimental research with young college students to explore attitudes on sexual activity and abortion. The results show that female respondents seem to see legal abortions in a negative light and that responsibility in abortion¹³ rights is related to individual morality. In other words, their attitudes are based on counter-intuitive understandings that young women would disagree with the right of women to exercise choice over their own bodies. There is a probable situation to examine further in my study on Lao women's attitudes to these subjects, with a broad-based decline in conventional norms and cultures, an increase in premarital sex, cohabitation and abortion for young women, and thus a quite significant socio-cultural transformation is taking place. My study aims to extend research in this area by examining young Lao women's understandings of and attitudes to these issues, considered in conjunction with their consumption of Thai TV soaps.

3.6 Television soap opera narrative forms: the case of Thai TV soaps

TV in Southeast Asia has culturally been influenced by not only Western channels and programmes but also other East Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea. Dissanayake (2012) examines the dynamic of Asian TV and illustrates the popularity of Japanese and Korean dramas in other Asian countries, including in Malaysia and Thailand. In addition, the study of

¹³ Abortion is illegal and widely considered immoral in Laos (Laos country review, 2016), <http://www.countrywatch.com>.

Iwabuchi (2004, cited in Dissanayake, 2012) emphasises how Japanese TV dramas have transnational appeal across the region. To explain their cross-border appeal, Dissanayake (2012, p. 192) argues that Japanese and Korean dramas have been very popular in other Asian countries because of “the common communicational philosophies and visions that [these countries] share”. It can be argued that what they share in this sense can be considered a common culture among Asian audiences, i.e. the Japanese and Korean media products present an Asian culture and Western flavour that Asian audiences can share together. Japanese and Korean TV media offer a hybridised programme which repackages western values and themes common to western audiences in an Asian-style presentation. In other words, they are popular because they can express common Asian cultural values in a Western flavour. This way of presentation can be seen as one of the reasons why these programmes have impact across Southeast Asia. Similarly, Thai soap operas are popular among Southeast Asian viewers¹⁴.

Thai TV soap operas¹⁵ have conventions and standards of narrative comprised of traditional and contemporaneous elements. The most obvious of all are the plot, character and the female character creation. These elements occur in Thai TV soap operas in the form of heterosexual romance narratives, themes of humanity, female characters as narrative centre, and female protagonists as beautiful and virtuous characters (Boonbunjong, 2011). Searching for types of ideological themes in Thai TV soap operas aired from 2006 to 2007 during the political crisis, Soontornviriyakul (2008) finds 16 ideological themes - economic ideologies (capitalism, materialism/consumerism, moneyism and self-sufficiency), political ideologies (nationalism and authoritarianism), social and cultural ideologies (social class, feudalism, patriarchy, feminism, localism, Buddhism, occultism, naturalism, romanticism, moralism) - which governed the behaviours of all the characters. Social class, capitalism, materialism/consumerism, and moneyism are frequently portrayed as causes of conflicts in soap operas, with romanticism eventually solving all problems. There is a representation of consumer culture in Thai soaps through dominant ideologies such as consumerism and moneyism; in contrast, opposing ideologies like localism and self-sufficiency ideology are portrayed to compromise with Thai cultural values. It is argued here that female Lao viewers sometimes

¹⁴ One interesting aspect of Thai soap opera trends in Southeast Asia is that the audience have different preferences in relation to soap opera viewing. Cambodian women and men of all ages living in both rural and urban areas like watching Thai soap operas which have storylines about property theft, adultery and Karma, while Burmese viewers like watching horror Thai soap operas. In addition, Vietnamese cable TV's purchase of Thai soap operas to broadcast with Chinese and English subtitles led to the popularity of Thai soap operas in the Philippines, Indonesia and Singapore (Amporn Jirattikorn, 2016).

¹⁵ Thai TV soap opera is regarded as a cultural commodity with a long history over at least five decades: the first Thai TV soap opera ‘สุริยาณีไม่ยอมแต่งงาน’ was aired on 5th January 1956. (Pornwipa Pongprasart, 2009).

accept and sometimes negotiate the encoded messages of soap narratives (see Chapters 5, 6 and 7).

Jirabovonwisut (2011) summarised the concept of gender and class in the creation of Thai television drama-script in the globalised period (1997-present), noting that the scripts are both adapted and invented in drama/melodrama genre, which is the most popular genre among Thai viewers. He noted how the themes of television drama script still revolve around the drama genre that accentuate love and familial relationship as main themes. Thai television drama-scripts usually have storylines about the romance of heterosexual couples who have conflicts about social class between a wealthy male/female leading protagonist and a poor female/male leading protagonist. It presents love in terms of different socioeconomic classes, but the characters can overcome this obstacle with marriage. In a sense, the love storylines of soap operas reflect class inequalities in society through various characters' backgrounds. Other themes in Thai television dramas focus on the Buddhist principles of Karma and belief in doing good and not judging people based on appearance. In addition, the dichotomy between the economic/political situations and humorous scenes are included and inserted in the dialogue to amuse the viewers, partly to alleviate the burdens they face in their daily lives.

Furthermore, the roles of women as portrayed in Thai TV soap operas still very much conform with a patriarchal worldview. The way Thai TV soaps usually represent women reflects the way Thai society still expects women to behave in accordance with traditional female roles (Tantiniranat, 2009; Ren, 2012). In other words, through the dramatic actions of female protagonists and plots we discern the standards of what a good Thai woman should be. For example, the woman must be very reticent about sexuality and hold traditional feminine virtues: although they are rich and quite independent, they should remain virgins and have to be faithful wives who are dedicated to the household (Nonlucha and Tularak, 2014). The leading female characters should be well-mannered and well-socialised, possess good cooking skills, and should be patient and take care of their parents, be obedient to their husbands, and perform housekeeping tasks related to the observational learning of male roles (Sawasdechchai, 2011). Therefore, these soaps through their portrayal of leading female characters, tend to reinforce the construction of the traditional roles of wife and mother.

On the other hand, the construction of some female protagonists in Thai soaps are hybridised between traditional and modern characters in more recent times. According to Buatoom (2011), from 2002 to 2009, the representations of Thai women show them to be modern, playing

important roles in society, recognising their own values and striving for success, also being heavily influenced by consumerism but maintaining traditional values and customs. It is argued that women portrayed in Thai soaps in this period became less passive, tended to be independent career-minded women and to be kind. For example, female protagonists are professional and beautiful characters who have lifestyles characterised by freedom and financial stability, and they usually possess fashionable clothes and luxurious accessories which are used to construct their own identities as modern women (Atijitta, 2012).

At the same time, some research on Thai society confirms that “the socio-economic change in Thai society has not affected the tradition and sexuality of Thais” (Archawanitchakul and Tarawan 2005, p. 80–81). The continued representation of Thai female antagonists or young women villains are positioned as anti-norms, folkways, mores and laws portrayed in Thai soap operas (Rattayanoon, 2004; Nuchpitak, 2009; Mathet, 2010). For example, young beautiful female antagonists leading luxury lifestyles have negative traits and are physically vicious: their acts of aggression, revenge and seduction finally see such women denounced as traitors who pay the price at the end of the storylines. In this sense, Thai TV soap operas as ideological practices give female viewers options for behaviours and relationships, conforming to, negotiating and rejecting traditional values and sexual norms. Therefore, the examination of female Lao viewers’ attitudes towards gender roles and sexual norms through the lens of their consumption of Thai soaps seeks to explore Lao women’s modern relationships and the development of women’s roles and duties in a modern Laos (see Chapter 6).

TV plots about family life are widely narrated in Thai soap operas, in particular situation comedies (sitcoms), to offer traditional family values through the process of socialisation to viewers. Since urbanisation shifts family structures in the direction of a nuclear family, Thai TV sitcoms try to construct ‘a role model of a good family’ full of love, for example, *Bann Nee Mee Ruk* (Full house of love) (Thippayachan, 2010) and *Heng Heng Heng* (Good and incredibly lucky) and *Bang Ruk Soi Kao* (Love district No. 9) (Kumpaengpan, 2006), in which viewers witness positive attitudes about the family institution from the exposure to these TV series. In addition, TV plots with homosexual characters are frequently presented in Thai soap operas and influence young audiences’ attitudes towards sexual identity (Ngarmwuthiworn, 2010). Similarly, a study of the attitudes of the film audience towards characterising the queer characters in 14 Thai films finds that the female and third gender audience tend to enjoy the overall presentation of queer characters and have a tendency to want to see more of these films

in the future (Samitinantana, 2010). Female Lao audiences' views on these issues are explored in Chapter 6.

3.6.1 Narrative analysis of Thai television soap operas

This section provides a literal understanding of the role of women, gender representation and consumption narratives constructed and portrayed in Thai television soap operas. I have examined narrative analysis of two key Thai television soap operas: “*Tom*” (darkness, sadness and fool) and “*Lhong Tang Rak*” (Getting lost in love). This will serve to underpin the analysis of the findings in chapters 5-7, which explores why Thai soap operas are enjoyed by Lao women.

Firstly, “*Tom*” presents the ideas of motherhood and wifhood in patriarchal capitalism. Regarding the main actress, *Kun Yai* is a middle-class, middle-aged, single mother who has made mistakes in her past but is now successful in her business. She divorced her husband after he committed adultery. In this context of being a divorce, the woman in the programme reconstructs the female representation of a mother as being a woman need not mean being ideal. She made a decision to divorce and meets the duties of being a working mother and a caring mother. Although her character is presented as a strong woman and a leader with a profitable business, she is finally punished because she does not play the expected role of the “good mother” (motherhood ideology) because she was responsible for her son’s drug addiction. Motherhood is therefore a discourse and social expectation of women in Thai society.

In addition, “*Tom*” shows women labouring as maids in capitalism. The representation of the female working class as maids changes between with the two characters *Mui* and *Jum*. *Mui*, who comes from the countryside and does not have any educational qualifications, enjoys drinking alcohol, gossiping, acting like a bully and moonlighting as a drug dealer, whereas *Jum*, who has also no education, displays a wisdom which turns the biggest obstacles into solvable problems. It shows that *Jum* has the ability to understand the typical problems facing middle-class and working-class people and their families in the capital city, such as teenage pregnancy. The portrayal of female secretaries is also another form of labouring women portrayed in “*Tom*”. *Apinya* is seen as a kind, clever and helpful secretary, even though she was born in a slum and her mother is a prostitute who has contracted HIV. She is the ideal woman that Thai cultural and political norms desire all women to be. *Apinya* has the wisdom to be a good woman, which is relevant to *Dhamma* (whose name literally means ‘truth of the way things are’) while

Joy is unwise and obsessed with superficial aspects of life such as clothes. Thus *Joy* is a representative of the type of woman who is unable to support her boss/husband/family.

“*Tom*” also presents a group of extremely rich women who enjoy dressing up, travelling and socialising. “*Tom*” portrays these women in negative ways through the characters *Pam and her friends*, who are obsessed with beauty, brand name products and modern lifestyles. For example, they usually meet up at department stores, a fitness centre, or a spa. *Pam* is therefore a character reflecting extravagant capitalist consumption. She also uses her femininity to get the things she desires, exploiting people’s naivety as she does. In this regard, her behaviour destroys moral integrity based on the traditional Buddhist teaching to refrain from taking that which is not given. *Pam* is depicted as a modern female character who ignores traditional feminine values (i.e. the standard rendition of how a “good woman” behaves according to accepted social norms) and refuses to sacrifice herself to family and behave in a conservative way.

The second soap, “*Lhong Tang Rak*” (Getting lost in love), is a romantic comedy drama of heterosexual love that intertwines stories based on social class. Although this soap opera presents both female protagonists and male antagonists, the main character is a female protagonist, *Le-Raksamee*, who has changed from being a dependent to an independent woman. She is strong, beautiful, rich and has studied abroad. She is also sporty, and excels at the combat arts of tae kwan do and boxing. She is thus “masculinised”, depicted as having masculine strength and stamina, yet at the same time is shown as a sweet and beautiful woman. The narrative appears to be suggesting that men desire Thai women to be capable of fulfilling two roles: a working woman and a caring woman. Following a car accident, *Le-Raksamee* suffers periods of amnesia. She becomes a kind, polite, generous and hard-working person, living in the main male protagonist’s house, a farmer and a widower called *Tiwa*, with his three children. She has to have a lot of patience to deal with the children. However, she is blessed with memory recovery and love from *Tiwa* and his children. *Le-Raksamee* and *Tiwa* finally marry and live happily together, a narrative of love and romance. This seems to suggest that a long and happy marriage is seen as a desirable cultural practice and social norm, signalling the extent of male hegemony in Thai society.

However, the portrayals of female working-class antagonists living in rural areas and behaving as modern women challenge the dominant gendered ideology in patriarchal society. For instance, *Rachavadee*, or *Miss dairy cow*, uses her body and beauty to gain money, material

items, fame and love. She was the first female character to utter the word “feminist” in a Thai soap opera, in a peculiar outfit and using specific gestures: “Miss dairy cow should have a positive outlook on life and environment. Thus, Miss dairy cow is a feminist and a leader in the family.” Audiences reacted with hoots of derision, indicating the negative views that some people have of the women’s movement and feminist ideology in societies such as Thailand, where patriarchy and hierarchy are deeply rooted. Hence, the portrayals of conservative women have apparently constructed by social norms in terms of traditional notions of femininity – polite, humble and helpful women, as desired by a society structured on patriarchy. It can be expected that these female characters are still being broadcast.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter provides an engagement between audience analysis and media effect studies in relation to women’s TV consumption and considers the broad characteristics of Thai soaps and female characters. The contemporary audience is an active one and a complex and differentiated picture of women as audiences emerges where women are no longer passive but interact with and react to the televisual texts they consume. The ‘uses and gratifications’ approach is useful in exploring audiences’ pleasures and viewing habits as individuals. For the interpretation of the meaning of media texts, my thesis draws upon Hall’s (1980) encoding-decoding model and serves as a theoretical tool to examine Lao female viewers’ sense of their changing identities through the lens of their Thai TV soaps consumption.

This chapter reviews the concept of audience and the recent literature on the relationship between women’s TV consumption and the effects of TV shows, in particular soap operas. The enjoyment of watching soap operas also generally provokes female viewers’ reactions to consumer cultures, lifestyles, beauty ideals, sexuality and modern relationships promoted in TV soaps. The individual and liberated lifestyles of women characters play an important role in how women negotiate their lives at a time of societal and cultural change and make sense of balancing tradition and modernity. This transformation in meaning-making undermines traditional notions of the role of women and the values women should uphold and threatens to contribute to a decline in traditional cultural norms. Studies on the influence of cross-cultural TV shows, in particular soap operas, on women audiences, suggest that they challenge the conventional norms of Asian countries, including Laos. Nevertheless, the narratives and symbolism of most Thai soap storylines eventually reinforce the values of femininity and social

norms, despite offering alternatives for women to try out. The next chapter will address the methodology and methodological tools for data collection employed by this research.

Chapter 4. Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This study, which is a part of a broader research effort focusing on sociocultural change in contemporary Laos, explores the developing cultural identity of Lao women and agency in the context of globalisation through the lens of Thai television soap opera consumption, as well as through the cultural policy enforced by the state to deal with the impact of cross-cultural media consumption on citizens' daily lives. Specifically, social life and the interpretation and construction of meaning in particular contexts are examined in order to explain how Lao women construct their identities, drawing on key concepts such as Hall's encoding/decoding model, feminist media studies and social constructivism, together explored through the lens of socially constructed realities (Neuman, 2003; Berg, 2009).

Section 4.2, 'Identifying the philosophical position: Constructivism', details the philosophical framework which informs the research design and methodology. This approach is "a way of thinking about and studying social reality [commonly, a process that involves] a set of procedures and techniques for gathering and analysing data" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 3) associated with a specific phenomenon.

Section 4.3, 'Research tools', discusses the choice and purpose of each research tool in relation to its purpose, issues of access, and sampling issues and strategy, as well as the practicalities of the data collection. The use of qualitative methodological techniques is central to revealing the link between the consumption of Thai TV soap operas and the Lao transnational audience, to which the participants in this study belong. Using multiple methods allowed investigation into the various ways in which accounts were constructed, while different research tools were also used to verify the participants' accounts. The advantages of using several methodological tools are seen in enhancing the validity and reliability of the data.

Firstly, at the beginning of the project, questionnaires were used in order to explore how and why Lao women watch Thai television, especially soap operas. This was useful in confirming the current popularity of Thai soaps among Lao women. The statistical data assessed the number of different programmes watched, the amount of time spent watching Thai TV soaps,

the favourite genres or types of Thai soaps, and so on. This preliminary stage established the choice, purpose, pleasures and satisfactions of cross-cultural media consumption.

Secondly and thirdly, TV diary-keeping and focus group discussions were used to analyse the women's interpretations of the soaps and their effects on their cultural identity and agency. This also provided insights into the perspectives and feelings of the Lao transnational audience. Fourthly, interviews were conducted with Lao politicians and a Lao academic in order to investigate cultural policy-making in response to the influence of Thai television in particular soap operas consumption on the country's citizens. These four methods were employed to ensure credibility and to maximise validity and dependability so as to "show indicators of stability and consistency in the process of inquiry" (Riege, 2003, p. 81).

Sections 4.4 and 4.5 provide an overview of the procedures for the analysis of the empirical data and triangulation for the validity and reliability of results. Sections 4.6 and 4.7 outline the ethical issues attendant on this study as well as the self-reflexive process employed during the data gathering and interpretation processes.

4.2 Identifying the philosophical position: Constructivism

This section explains this study's understanding of what knowledge is and how it is produced in order to identify the ontological and epistemological questions engaged with and to fit the project into a suitable interpretive framework. Epistemological discussions include philosophical arguments about reality and how we can understand our social world (Meeto and Temple, 2003). The epistemological position for this study draws on a constructivist–interpretivist approach. This was the context within which I explored the experiences of Lao female TV viewers in three regional areas of Laos: Vientiane, Houayxay, and Bolikhamsai.

From a social constructivist, phenomenological, or interpretative standpoint, reality is always re-constructed (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, 2011, 2018; Lincoln and Guba, 2013). Working within a constructivist paradigm, therefore, means that there is no one 'true' explanation of social reality (Hertz, 1997). Instead, people negotiate and construct explanations of their changing sociocultural reality. As Denzin and Lincoln (2011) state, a constructivist philosophical approach claims that the world is constructed by individual and subjective interpretations. That is, an approach founded on social constructivism sees research as a 'social'

reality that does not come from one single correct perspective; rather, participants and researchers co-construct social reality based on participants' views and values.

The constructivist paradigm is the epistemological position of this study. Social reality as constructed through language is explored using methods such as interviewing, focus groups, and diary-keeping. This is in contrast to a positivist approach, which claims that there is one 'true' knowledge of the world to be discovered through observation. Constructivists build knowledge that is not confined by traditional conventions of observation, so that knowledge can be produced by verbal exchanges that are regarded as relativist (Burr, 2003), or ontological relativism (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). This contrasts with positivism in that the latter claims the existence of objective data which are awaiting discovery by an impartial researcher. Knowledge was obtained in this research through interpretations of verbal exchanges. In a sense, constructivist researchers are viewed as co-producers of knowledge due to the way that meaning is constructed between the researcher and the participant.

The constructivist epistemological position of this study, which relates to the methodological design, is shaped by the experience of collecting, interpreting, and analysing the study's data. In its aim of exploring the influence of transnational consumption of Thai soap operas amongst Lao women. My study is closely associated with the field of cultural studies, which considers the issues of "community, identity, agency and change" in the context of the global-local sphere (Grossberg and Pollock, 1998, cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p.160), to provide a nuanced understanding of cross-border and cross-cultural TV audiences. Specifically, in this study, television soap operas are the cultural, historical, political, and economic accounts (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, 2018) that were examined in order to establish the meanings generated from the audiences' interpretations and negotiations of the representation of consumerism, women's bodies, and romantic relationships in soap operas.

The soap operas, which transmit 'Westernised' views and lifestyles characterised by a particular understanding of freedom and autonomy, further work as a dialogical platform for Lao women to discuss their choices of consumption, agency, and individualisation in relation to personal and family relationships within an environment of socioeconomic change. Therefore, the construction of Lao women's cultural identity, agency, self-satisfaction, and social aspiration in contemporary Laos was explored through the lens of their consumption of Thai TV soap operas.

4.3 Research tools

This section discusses the four major research tools employed in the study: 1) the questionnaire survey, 2) TV diaries, 3) focus groups, and 4) the in-depth interview.

4.3.1 Questionnaire

It is important to make clear how and why Lao women watch Thai television, especially soap operas. To obtain this knowledge, questionnaires were employed as the primary method of data collection. The questionnaire has a meaningful role to play in academic research as a means of investigating what is likely to be occurring in a society at any given moment (Robson, 2011). A questionnaire can be described as an overarching common method of gathering data that uses a format which enables standardised, relatively structured data to be gathered about a substantial demographic group of participants (Matthews and Ross, 2010).

In this study, conducting face-to-face discussions on the topic of TV viewing with a representative sample of Laotian audiences helped to explain the pop phenomenon of Thai TV cross-cultural consumption. The questionnaire survey was given to 300 Lao female viewers who watch Thai TV. The first component of this research aimed to explore the consumption of Thai television, particularly soap operas, by Lao women. The research hypothesis is based on the assumption that Lao women are fond of Thai television soap operas. In this case, I attempted to make an accurate and unbiased assessment of the transnational audience, which is the focus of the study.

However, survey research also has several weaknesses. Firstly, surveys cannot capture the detail of complex topics. Although this problem can be partly offset through complicated analyses, it is an inherent drawback of survey research. Likewise, survey research can seldom deal with the context of social life. The limitations of quantitative research in the relevant studies are well established (e.g. Ang, 1991; Morley, 1990), so that employing only this method would not provide a comprehensive understanding of a cultural practice in relation to the meaningful and hidden receptions of audiences. Survey research is generally weak on validity and strong on reliability (Babbie, 2004) because validity in quantitative assumptions refers to “the establishment of cause-and-effect relationships”, while validity in a qualitative study “lies in establishing phenomena in a credible way” (Riege, 2003, p. 80) to ensure the conclusions are valid. Therefore, I opted to cross-check the questionnaire results, employing a within-method

and between-method triangulation to establish its credibility, using TV diary recordings, focus groups, and interviews.

Another weakness of survey research is the problem of questionnaires not being returned or partial/non-completion. Eight questionnaires were found that did not produce a complete list of answers. A well-designed paper questionnaire survey should be provided to mitigate against this (Couper, Traugott and Lamias, 2001). The clearer the explanation on the first page of the questionnaire, the more likely it is that good co-operation will be obtained from the participants. A pilot test of ten questionnaires was also carried out before the survey began in order to check its validity and reliability and to maximise completion, before sending out three hundred documents.

The results from the questionnaire were used to explain how and why Lao women watch Thai transnational television, in particular Thai TV soap operas, as described by the uses and gratifications approach to media consumption (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch 1974), where the focus is on motivational factors, such as the interests, needs, or gratifications sought and obtained by the audience. The data analysed by SPSS also provided evidence that Lao women habitually watch Thai TV soap operas, and that they intended to participate in the focus groups afterwards. A selection of survey respondents acted as volunteers in focus groups, chosen by their given personal information in a section on demographic data (a questionnaire form including age, occupation or job, and city of residence). I then contacted them via either email or telephone to arrange an appointment to meet them.

Questionnaires were distributed through a non-probability sampling strategy (which specifies that the probability of the selection of each respondent is unknown), in order to control the selection process and to obtain the data in relation to the pleasures and satisfactions of media usage and in relation to the behaviour of Lao women based on their understanding and perception of Thai television consumption. Probability sampling (in which the probability that any respondent is selected is equal) was not used because it was deemed not feasible for this study, since every demographic factor would not have a chance of being selected under the conditions of a limited sample size that was selected from a large population living in different places (Levy and Lemeshow, 1999).

Data was collected through questionnaires completed by Lao women living in three main areas: the capital city of Vientiane, Houayxay city in Bokeo province, and Pakxan district in

Bolikhamsai province. Three hundred questionnaires were prepared for the three cities (100 questionnaires per city). The first area, Vientiane, was chosen because it is the capital city of Laos, where citizens' lifestyles are marked by state control as the political and economic centre. The government provides modern facilities for the people, such as colleges and the national university, banks, department stores, restaurants, internet cafés, and cinemas. Also located here is the First Thai–Lao Friendship Bridge, which crosses the river at a point 18 kilometres downstream from the city of Nong Khai in Thailand: this is the major daily crossing point for Laotians, Thai people and foreigners. The national capital Vientiane is seen as an urban landscape being recreated by modernisation and Western values.

The second area was Houayxay city, Bokeo province, in the north of Laos. This city is notable for the traditional dichotomy between rural and urban landscape, with expanding industrial zones and suburbs. The Fourth Thai–Lao Friendship Bridge, which opened in December 2013, is located at Ban Houayxay; Asian Highway 3, which runs through here, extends north to the Yunnan province of China and south to the Chiang Rai province of Thailand. Many Laotians in Houayxay city are potentially enlivened by land reform and visitors in times of socioeconomic change.

The third area, Pakxan city, in the province of Bolikhamsai in western Laos, faced many invasions from what was then Siam (modern day Thailand) throughout its history. The province is bordered to the west by the Mekong River and the Bueng Kan province of Thailand; the town's proximity to Thailand's economy has stimulated cross-border trade development. However, Bolikhamsai's infrastructure, including services, irrigation, electrification, and land transport, remains inadequate (Asian Development Bank, 2017). People in Pakxan city hence face challenges such as inefficient public-sector management and limited human capital. Pakxan district is seen as a rural location of Laos, with about 27,000 inhabitants.

Before I was able to reach the point of recording the women's views about their consumption of Thai soap operas, advance preparation was needed, since the study involved international fieldwork in Laos. Due to local bureaucratic stipulations, I needed approval for the project. I therefore asked for official permission from the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism to carry out the research. I also used personal contacts to deliver the questionnaires through Lao friends, who also acted as my hosts and accompanied me in the fieldwork.

The data collection was carried out using paper questionnaires (see Appendix A), which were handed out to respondents in the three cities in Laos. In Vientiane, this was done in fresh-food markets, department stores, temples, bus transport stations, Chao Anuvong Park, colleges and National University of Laos, and international companies, all locations that are crowded with Laotians sharing different characteristics in terms of age, class and education. In Houayxay city in Bokeo province, I went to Danthin Village, which has made considerable economic progress in improving the quality of life and education of its residents in recent years (Asian Development Bank, 2006). In Bolikhamsai province, I went to Pakxan district, opposite the border with Beung Kan Province, Thailand. The Pakxan–Beung Kan border is open to nationals, foreigners, and vehicles without visas can obtain a visa on arrival in Pakxan. I distributed the questionnaires to Lao respondents with face-to-face contact and offered some further clarification. A pen was provided for the respondents to answer the questionnaires and this was subsequently gifted to them as a thank-you for participating.

However, I experienced difficulties in this since Laos generally prohibits surveys of people's opinions, in particular through giving questionnaires to the public. Any research project that receives permission from the government still needs to collect the data in a prescribed place and with the people they provide; this was something I discovered later. On Wednesday, 11 March, 2015, I decided to deliver the questionnaires on my own in the market (Ta-lad chao) in Vientiane city, which is where my trouble started. Two Lao policemen observed me and asked me to stop carrying out the survey. Thai officials at the Thai Royal Embassy in Vientiane then clarified my position and guided me through the complicated approval process so that I could continue conducting this research project.

When delivering questionnaires in Houayxay and Bolikhamsai, I was careful to avoid the same problem that happened in Vientiane. The questionnaires and the letter asking for permission to undertake the survey were sent to the district's chief officers, and I waited for confirmation of permission for the survey.

4.3.2 *TV Diaries*

This study employs TV recording in diaries to further advance our knowledge of cross-cultural TV consumption, in particular the viewing of Thai TV soap operas among Lao female viewers. I draw on the experience of Helen Simons' (2009) pilot study into digital television viewing habits, which used TV diaries as a method. This practice showed that the use of face-to-face

surveys with closed questions was not the best strategy for exploring personal TV viewing habits since we do not obtain detailed enough answers through closed questions and the participants have great difficulty in retrieving their previous viewing behaviour (Simons, 2009). The paper diary recordings are likely to “reduce recall bias and produce more reliable and valid data” (Larsson and Fichtel, 2012, p. 130). TV diary recordings can be regarded as a method to improve the sense of participants’ privacy.

Lee (1999) found that diaries provide an appropriate method to study activities over time and that they have a role to play in “the study of sensitive topics [with] concluded problems of sample bias” (p. 116), a stance supported by Waddington’s (2005) study of gossip in the workplace. In my study, therefore, TV diary-writing was employed as a research tool to examine viewers’ reasons for watching Thai soap operas and their attitudes towards the soap opera texts.

Moreover, TV diaries are an effective tool employed to check the behavioural patterns of an audience while they are watching television. In audience research, diary-keeping has successfully been used on large-scale projects (e.g. Gauntlett and Hill, 1999; Pisters, 2010). In the case of this study, this technique allowed participants to keep a record of their daily intake of soap operas, developing written “insider accounts” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 158) of their media consumption, and diminishing sources of bias that an interfering researcher might have instilled by observing their television viewing (Segrin and Nabi, 2002). Furthermore, Thai TV soap viewing via computer, tablet, smartphone, and media application has been examined in TV recordings in diaries. Participants were able to write down the channels or media they used to access Thai TV messages.

Diaries demand a wide range of data and energy from the participants, and television diaries, particularly unstructured ones in which participants report their activities in their own words, are difficult to complete. To limit the participants’ workload, I developed a semi-structured version. Using a specific set of questions in a table format, which asked about the participant’s TV viewing activities and perception of Thai TV soaps at a given time, simplified the structure of the task but still produced the required data.

The final version of the TV diary consisted of questions on five topics which Lao participants could answer in their own words. The topics were: 1) their viewing pattern of Thai TV programmes in general; 2) when and why they watched Thai soap operas; 3) their levels of

satisfaction with the Thai soap operas they watched; 4) participants' positive and negative perceptions of Thai soap operas; and 5) participants' suggestions and critical questions about Thai soap operas. All five questions were presented in a table format divided into two weekly sections from Monday to Sunday in an effort to encourage participants to be personally involved with the process. A blank copy of a TV diary template for two weeks can be found in Appendix B. This form of TV diary had advantages in cost and time efficiency, and also generated sensitive and personal topics related to love and relationship issues (see Chapter 6 for further discussion).

In regard to the diaries, purposive sampling was used, which means that participants were selected because they had particular characteristics that suited the main topic of the study. The sample in my study was comprised of both individual viewers and their families. In previous studies, researchers have argued that the research unit of television study should be the family/household (Morley, 1986), but these days television viewing behaviour has fragmented into a less social activity (Barkhuss, 2009). In order to explore in greater detail Lao women's use of media and their Thai soap opera viewing behaviour and practices, I selected participants from the questionnaire survey who scored highly in the section about Thai TV soap opera consumption. The participants selected declared themselves to be frequent viewers of Thai TV soaps and were willing to participate in the study. Fifteen Lao female participants (five people per city) were asked to fill in diaries over a two-week period.

I also asked for participants' personal information, such as their careers, and a contact number, in order to explain the use of TV diaries and to gain their agreement for data collection and additional communication. The group consisted of 15 Lao women in the three different cities in Laos (Vientiane, Houayxay, and Bolikhamsai). The diarists handwrote their entries, which were monitored and, at the end, anonymised and translated from Lao to Thai. The use of TV diaries was rather useful: the participants provided rich data on the patterns of TV viewing and informative discussion of the topics of storylines and actresses. However, their handwriting was not easy to decipher, and there were four participants (26 per cent) who did not record TV diaries every day and wrote short answers instead.

I myself delivered the blank TV diaries document to the participants at their workplaces and homes. I used face-to-face interviews in relation to or alongside the diaries to detect interesting or unexpected findings in order to avoid any misunderstandings. The TV diarist participants had an opportunity to ask for explanations of how to use the diaries. From the beginning, I

explained that their contributions were confidential and that they were free to abandon the exercise if they wished to. However, they were asked to take the diary only if they intended to complete it, and to return it upon completion by prepaid post.

To encourage the participants to return their diaries, I presented the diaries that I had prepared, including good-quality envelopes with a typed address to a named researcher and pre-stamped with first-class postage. After I received the diaries, the participant was called to thank her for her contribution. For their part, the participants ensured that the TV diaries were kept in good condition and out of the reach of children.

4.3.3 Focus groups

The second research aim is to analyse how Lao women construct the meaning of the representations of women and storylines in Thai TV soap operas. A focus group is a useful research tool for this because its primary function is to allow the researcher to listen to and observe conversations among knowledgeable participants. Bryman (2012) notes that a focus group is used for the clarification of issues related to the research question at the outset of the research as well as at the end. A focus group therefore provides the different views of informants or participants, which should lead to revised or new ideas for the researcher (Kitzinger, 1994). Also, the research themes can be extended beyond the researcher's assumptions expressed in the questionnaire's questions.

In this study, there were time limitations on the international fieldwork, which were weighed against the need to gain the richest data possible. Due to the need to visit three unfamiliar areas of Laos within three months of investigation, I had to carefully plan for cooperation with Lao government officials and the participants, as well as deal with transportation and a shortage of cheap accommodation.

The focus groups were also designed as a form of triangulation to cross-check the validity of the questionnaires and TV diaries to determine whether Lao women can interpret soap opera texts in the same way as they respond to the questionnaire and diary questions. Therefore, focus groups were used to analyse how the participants relate to the Thai TV soap opera texts in relation to their cultural identity. In my study, thirty-two survey respondents participated in focus groups, and eight participants who discussed in the focus group were able to continue TV diary writing.

The skills and experience of the moderator of a focus group are essential in order to keep the discussion on track (Ward and Hansen, 1987; Priest, 2010). I acted as a moderator and had to make sure that all the participants were given a chance to express their opinions about the issues. In the case of the Vientiane participants, the conversation was monopolised by a few participants. I had to be conscientious, a good listener, and had to encourage all the group members to respond to the given topic. In some cases, in Houayxay and Bolikhamsai, the participants were too shy to discuss and exchange ideas because whilst they preferred speaking Thai with me, they spoke it with Lao accents. I started to talk Lao with them to make them more comfortable with the discussion. In addition, a relaxed and friendly atmosphere encouraged the participants to pick up on or react genuinely to the comments from the other group members, which also led to a better quality of information.

With regard to organising focus group, Gibbs (1997) states that sometimes it is not easy to choose the most suitable volunteers to attend the group discussions. Hester (1996) proposed that the group participants should be a heterogeneous mix from a variety of backgrounds, for example, in terms of social class and occupation. This would provide various perspectives and insights which could be more useful in addressing the given issue. In contrast, if a group is too homogeneous, it may not provide the necessary diversity in terms of information (Kinnear and Taylor, 1996).

To recruit the participants, I applied a purposive technique, in that I examined the characteristics of the participants to find Lao female viewers who could and were willing to provide their information, and then used a snowball technique to find individual participants. I obtained their personal details - name, age, career, and mobile phones numbers - from their friendship groups (the snowball technique). Then I called to the participants in Vientiane and I visited the participants' houses and workplaces in Houayxay and Bolikhamsai to explain the research project and ask permission to conduct focus groups. Using the purposive technique, I defined the main criteria of the area they lived in, and the attribute of being 'big fans' of Thai soap operas. Educational level and income were also considered in order to ensure that the group was representative of Lao women.

The reason for this is that these characteristics (being a fan of Thai soap operas, age, education, and income) were regarded as significant factors in determining Lao women's attitudes to and perceptions of the programmes that relate to and may impact on their cultural identity and agency. In other words, their age can show for how long they have experienced Thai soap operas

as influential cultural products; the area in which they live can indicate how closely they experience Western values and modernity through cross-border communication and within a local community whose cohesion might be enhanced through the consumption of shared media; and being an enthusiastic fan of Thai soap operas can signify how absorbed and involved they are in the programmes. These issues are discussed in chapters 5–7 (findings).

Regarding the criterion of the location in which the focus group participants lived, I selected the top three metropolitan cities of Laos on the basis of their geographical proximity, as centres of state control, being hubs of trade and investment between Thailand and Laos, and as tourism centres that Thai and Western tourists usually visit, since this implies that these three areas have more opportunity to consume Thai and Western media on a regular basis. The details of the three cities – Vientiane, Houayxay, and Bolikhamsai – have been discussed above.

The educational level and income factors were defined in order to examine the increase of Lao women's aspirations, choices, and financial independence to achieve Western lifestyles. These factors framed the changing attitudes of Lao women towards their identity, agency and individualisation, which impact on the traditional cultures of Laos.

After the social factors of the participants had been identified, I coordinated all the participants to make an appointment for the focus group, including the date, time, and place. The study consisted of seven focus groups, with 53 participants in total and seven or eight participants in each group. Three groups were conducted in Vientiane city (24 participants), on 23 April and 15 and 26 May, 2015; two groups in Houayxay (14 participants) on 8 and 9 May, 2015; and two groups in Bolikhamsai (15 participants) on 4 April, 2015. In return for the participants' cooperation, drinks and snacks were supplied afterwards.

For seven of the upper-class participants come from the media. Three celebrities allowed me to reveal their names: 1) Annita Thivaphone, singer and the owner of jewellery Viengkham; 2) Piyamart Phounpaseuth (Barbie), model, actress, singer, and first runner-up Miss Lao 2013; and 3) Piyadar Inthavong (Lingling), model, actress, and second runner-up Miss International Queen 2014. For the other 50 participants, pseudonyms were used to provide anonymity (discussed in more detail in section 4.6, 'Ethical issues').

All of the focus group discussions were recorded so that what was said could be transcribed for thematic analysis later. However, before any focus group conversation began, I gathered

informed consent from all the participants for this audio recording. Each session took approximately one to one and a half hours and followed the same format.

Firstly, the conversation was opened. Secondly, I encouraged the participants to introduce themselves in order for them to get to know one another and to build a rapport and relaxed atmosphere to facilitate the conversation. Thirdly, I asked introductory questions about Thai soap operas, such as how long they had been watching them, how often they usually watched them, and why they were interested in viewing them. Fourthly, I facilitated the discussion by asking the participants' opinions about the Thai soap operas they watched. A copy of the question guide and the participants' information can be found in Appendices C and D.

Due to travel and personal difficulties, I decided to choose quiet restaurants and a coffee shop at a petrol station as venues for the focus groups in Vientiane. In Houayxay, a bamboo table was the meeting room for the street vendors, the house of a participant representative was the meeting room for the farmers and housewives, was used for teenagers and other workers. In Bolikhamsai, the discussion groups were conducted at a guest house and karaoke bar. I finally obtained lively discussion in all the successful focus groups.

Due to an unexpected problem of the noise from outside, the tape recordings of the conversations are not perfectly clear; nonetheless, the discussions went smoothly. I developed a good rapport with the participants; for instance, the rural participants said that I should stay in Houayxay longer in order to see the region, although I did not take advantage of their hospitality.

4.3.4 *In-depth 'elite interviews'*

The third research aim of this study is to explore how transnational TV consumption of Thai television by Lao women in their daily lives impacts on the Lao government's attitude. Therefore, in-depth interviews were undertaken with Lao politicians, as in-depth interviews are claimed to be "a source of information, with the assumption that interviewing results in a true and accurate picture of the respondents' selves and lives" (Fontana and Frey, 2005, p. 698).

Regarding the collection and analysis of cultural policy information, interviews were employed as the formal technique by which I requested verbal evidence or data from knowledgeable policymakers and politicians. The objective was to obtain insightful data. The purpose of

qualitative interviewing is to derive interpretations, not facts or laws, from informants' comments (Hoaf, 2004). The interview allowed me close access to the in-depth data that was produced, in the form of an interview transcript that contained the interviewees' construction of their existing social reality based on their experiences and viewpoints. Hence, interviewing enabled the researcher to elicit information from the interviewees on their feelings and opinions about the role of Thai media, the influence of Thai television, and its consequences for government policies, by using questions and interactive dialogue (Miller and Glassner, 2011).

This research method is also an appropriate tool of choice for the following reasons. One advantage of the in-depth interview was that it enabled face-to-face interaction with Lao politicians and policymakers as interviewees, which was useful in observing their reactions during the conversation. Interviews are also a good tool for probing for in-depth information about particular or hidden issues, opinions, and attitudes (Fontana and Frey, 1998; Mason, 2002). Another strength of the in-depth interview is that it always allows the researcher to follow up questions in order to pursue a topic, providing a significant amount of detailed data as well as unexpected information which is of benefit to the study (Holstein and Curium, 2004).

One function of the elite interviews in this study was to accumulate details of the "attitudes, values, and beliefs" of people who have power (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002, p. 673). Elite interviewing is recognised as a useful tool for enhancing personal understanding of the values, beliefs, motives, and explanations of respondents, thereby allowing researchers to focus on (and seem to defy) the individual answers of policymakers in a subjective way (Selwyn, 2013). One of the most distinct advantages of the elite interviews is that I could carry them out directly with the politicians and use them to probe and gain first-hand insights into, and explanations of, real events from eyewitnesses (Tansey, 2007), as well as obtain detailed explanations from documents and secondary sources provided by the politicians.

Nonetheless, elite interviews have limitations and weaknesses. As George and Bennett (2005, p. 102) suggest, elite interviewees have an incentive to distort their comments in order to express a "careful, multi-dimensional process of policymaking" to the public. In my study, the interviews with Lao elite politicians indicate that there is no straightforward answer to the social problems and wider trend of the cultural detraditionalisation of modern Laos. For example, the politicians' views stressed the strengths of family harmony, peaceful and simple lifestyles, the conventional femininity of Lao women (including traditional dress), and the significance and

value of monogamy, attitudes which differ considerably from those of the young participants in my study.

Ethical aspects form an important dimension of the research process and need to be resolved when conducting interviews of this nature. The first issue that arises is establishing an appropriate identity for the interviewer in relation to inequalities and differences in status. As Rivera (2000) has said, female researchers are confronted with a hierarchical problem, so they should express their human rights and be confident about sharing their opinions and feelings. In addition, issues of identity and power may adversely affect the interview (Rivera, 2000).

In my study, due to the power imbalance between Lao male politicians, who have full authority and power, and a female Thai PhD student, elite interviewing presented difficulties: Lao politicians often deflected questions, shut down lines of questioning, and, occasionally, wilfully asked me an uncomfortable question or made a contentious statement. For example, they asked, ‘Are you Thai or Lao?’, and said ‘I think Thai people usually look down on Laotians; they think they are superior’, and ‘The north-eastern region of Thailand belonged to Laos, some local cultures and traditions originally came from Laos.’

In elite interviews, the interviewer needs to have a good level of skill or ability when dealing with the conversation and needs to be careful regarding these ethical concerns. The issue with the politicians outlined above is rooted in a controversial relationship between Laos and Thailand. I gave honest answers to them: ‘I am a Thai who likes Lao food and textiles [smile]’, and ‘We are neighbouring countries that support each other, and have had a good relationship for many years in various aspects. There are many Thai tourists that travel in Laos today. Even though some Thai TV programmes used to portray Laotians as labourers and maids, the portrayal has changed.’ In this event, I was not very confident at the time that my answers were helpful, but I afterwards built a relaxed, polite, warm, and empathetic atmosphere which enabled smooth interviews.

This study made use of deliberate purposive sampling, which entailed defining the key informants who play an important role in cultural and media policy-making in Laos. Clearly, the biggest challenge was to establish a base of participants who would allow me to interview them. A snowballing-based sample, which relies on “one initial contact with an informant that in turn leads to other contacts” (Gunter, 2002, p. 239), seemed the best approach to overcome such an obstacle.

To access these interviewees, the first step was to coordinate with two Thai lecturers at Mahasarakham University (Associate Professor Dr Supachai Singyabuth) and Naresuan University (Associate Professor Dr Jirawat Phirasant). Both Thai lecturers have worked with Lao academics and Lao artists, and they suggested that I interview Lao officials in the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism. They gave me the contact details of five people (two Lao officials, two Lao academics, and a Lao national artist) to ask for their cooperation in arranging the interviews. I emailed them and followed up the emails with phone calls and eventually arranged to interview four of them (three Lao politicians and a Lao academic and artist).

The second step was to visit Ms Pasika Phornprasert, the First Secretary of the Royal Thai Embassy in Vientiane, to introduce myself and to ensure my safety during the international fieldwork. After that I applied the snowball technique by asking her to permit access to Lao politicians or the relevant governmental officials. For the next step, I contacted Ms Paivanh Boontavong, the Lao officer who works in Lao National Television, whom I already knew. She coordinated the official government papers in order to gain access to those Lao politicians with high positions related to media and culture. After submitting the official government papers to five politicians, Ms. Boontavong and I called the politicians' private secretaries to confirm a date and time for interviewing. I ended up interviewing four politicians since one of them needed to attend an urgent meeting in Malaysia.

Finally, I conducted interviews with seven Lao politicians: 1) Mr Bouangeun Xaphouvong, Vice Minister in the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism and Member of the Lao National Assembly, on 14 May, 2015; 2) Mr Sipheng Vongpanya, Director General of the Department of Mass Culture on 24 April, 2015; 3) Mr Khamphouang Inthavongsy, General Director in the Performing Arts Department, on 22 April, 2015; 4) Mr Bounlap Douangphoumy, Deputy Director General of Lao National Television, on 23 April, 2015; 5) Dr Bouakhay Phengphanh, Deputy Director General of the Department of Publishing, on 9 March, 2015; 6) Mr Inpone Nakhonsy, Deputy Director General of the Mass Media Department, on 14 May, 2015; and 7) Mr Khamkhong Kongvongsa, Public Relations Advisor in the Ministry of Energy and Mines and Deputy Director of the Centre for the Development of Radio and Television, on 17 March, 2015. I also interviewed Mr Khongphat Luangrath, a Lao academic and artist, on 10 March, 2015.

I conducted the in-depth elite interviews in the politicians' workplaces, normally in their offices. The interviewer and interviewee spoke in both Lao and Thai as Laotians and Thai people can

generally understand one another since the languages are closely related. Moreover, Laos and Thailand have a vast number of similarities in terms of customs, traditions, religion, and language that are rooted deeply in their history. Therefore, the language barrier and social differences between the interviewees and myself were not problematic.

One-to-one, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were employed in my study since the politicians, as the key informants, needed everything to go according to schedule and some of them also requested the interview questions in advance for their own preparation. According to Bryman (2004), a semi-structured interview format contains a list of prepared questions and open-ended questions that allow the interviewee to answer freely. The interviewer can also ask additional unplanned questions to follow up on what the interviewee says.

The semi-structured format was applied with the politicians to prepare a clear list of questions, most of which were open-ended. I was very aware of the time constraints facing the politicians. Using an unstructured format would have required too much time to obtain the particular answers; therefore, a semi-structured interview was deemed the best option. Examples of the interview questions can be found in Appendix E.

To show my respect for Lao culture in the interviews, I wore a Lao sarong (a long skirt) and tied up my hair in the way that Lao women do in Laos's official places. Also, I avoided asking 'why' questions that might have come across as critical of the interviewees' nationality or political views. Instead, I asked 'what' or 'how' questions. I was flexible in terms of when, during the set time period, I interviewed the politicians as they had many other demands on their time. In addition, I asked their permission to record our conversation. They accepted my request and also invited me to email or telephone to them if I needed more information.

4.4 Analytical approach

The two main and three subsidiary research questions of this study are:

1) What pleasures do Lao women derive from watching Thai soap operas? Unpacking that research question, I address three sub-themes related to Lao female viewers of Thai soap operas?

1.1 How do viewers negotiate Thai soap content when storylines often contravene traditional Lao values and cultural traditions?

1.2 To what extent do viewers aspire to or reject the consumerism they see in programme content?

1.3 How (if at all) do viewers relate to storylines which portray ‘modern’ sexual behaviours, fashion, and lifestyles?

2) How are the Lao government’s attitudes to the impact of Thai TV soap operas on Lao citizens in their everyday lives?

This section aims to summarise how the evidence for my study was systematised.

4.4.1 SPSS statistics

I used descriptive statistics – percentage – to explain the questionnaire results. The output shows the demographic data of Lao female respondents (185 participants). It also shows the number and percentage of Thai TV programmes watched (including the types of TV service, the duration of watching, and whom they watched with), the types of Thai TV programmes, the genres of Thai TV soap operas, the reasons they watched Thai soap operas, and the number of Thai soaps viewed by Lao women.

4.4.2 Thematic analysis

Data analysis demands ample time and reflection, from conducting the interviews and focus group discussions to reviewing the data. Throughout the process of transcribing the voice files and checking the accuracy of the transcription, each step engaged me more deeply with the participants’ lived experiences. Multiple methods were used as additional levels of analysis for the organisation of the data. These multiple methods were employed not only within and across interviews, but also across data sources.

The verbal and written discourses in terms of coding what the participants said about their consumption of television soap operas were analysed. Similarly, the interviewed politicians presented their points of view, the meanings of which were extracted through different forms of coding from the transcription of the in-depth interviews. A similar process was applied to the TV diaries and focus groups. Additionally, every focus group and interview session was taped and transcribed into Thai for subsequent analysis.

The task of coding in reception analysis consists of generating “a practical thematic indexing of the transcript discourse”, drawing the researcher in, to indicate “patterned relationships of media experiences” (Schroder *et al.*, 2003, p.168). For Jensen (2002), the concept of coding expounds “two different understandings of how words, numbers, and mental categories can be matched to phenomena in reality” (p. 246). In this sense, thematic analysis was used in this study to identify, analyse, and present patterns (themes) within the various interpretations of the Lao women’s TV soap consumption in relation to their sense of cultural identity and agency.

Thematic analysis is accepted as an important and basic method of qualitative analysis (Holloway and Todres, 2003), which has the advantage of flexibility. It involves a quest for themes that emerge as significant to the narration of the incident (Daly, Kellehear, and Gliksman, 1997). The process relates to the identification of themes by way of the “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice and Ezzy, 1999, p. 258). In other words, it is a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis. By this method, as the researcher I found six major themes in my study: (1) brand name satisfaction versus the calm sufficiency of needs and aspirations; (2) fashion consumption versus traditional dress; (3) beauty consumerism and female body aspiration for the thin, white, and international look, versus traditional femininity and beauty; (4) being nice or inner beauty versus physical beauty and improvement in appearance with cosmetic surgery; (5) modern personal and family relationships versus the conventional and extended family; and (6) the pursuit of individualism and self-reliance versus collectivist values of obedient and passive women.

Table 4.1: Number of participants in each fieldwork activity

| Fieldwork activity | Respondents/Participants/Interviewees |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Questionnaire survey | 185 |
| TV Diary-keeping | 15* |
| Focus Group | 53* |
| Interviewed politicians and academics | 8 |
| Total participants | 193 |

* The diarists (15) and the focus group participants (53) had also previously answered the questionnaire survey (185).

Table 4.2: A summary for analysis of the empirical evidence

| Fieldwork phase | Empirical activity | Tool of data collection | Knowledge outcome | Category of analysis |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Survey sessions | Delivering questionnaires | Paper questionnaires | Thai TV consumption Soap opera viewing behaviours Pleasures in media use Natural setting | Statistical data |
| Diaries | TV diary-keeping | Personal reports | Interpretation of soap storylines Unobtrusive TV viewings and attitudes | Super-themes |
| Focus groups | Group discussion | Group dynamic | Changing attitudes towards consumption and romantic relationships as lived experiences | Agreement Disagreement Super-themes |
| In-depth interviews | Elite interviews with Lao politicians | Semi-structured interviews | Cultural maintenance and preservation | Deixis |

Table 4.2 contains a summary that provides the research methods of each fieldwork activity in the study. It also illustrates the types of coding used for the analysis of the data, as well as presenting a summary of the key tools used for data analysis. ‘Super-themes’ refers to the repeated words, phrases and issues that were discerned from the participants’ diaries. ‘Deixis’ refers to words that cannot be fully understood without contextual information, which was the case with the interview data: the words or phrases used by the politicians make sense only as part of a longer utterance. I therefore also considered the context of the Lao–Thai relationship in terms of historic, economic, cultural, and political factors which impact on the politicians’ attitudes. In addition, their voices, facial expressions and gestures were interpreted. Thematic analysis in my study therefore involved the organisation and description of the data set in great detail, as well as being a method that worked both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface reality.

4.5 Triangulation for validity and reliability of the results

The main advantage of using more than one method in an investigation is triangulation, even though it is a time-consuming practice. The overall aim of my study is to examine the influence of Thai TV soap operas in shaping the identity of Lao women as audience. The second question about how does the Lao government attempt to restrict the incursions of non-Lao TV and encourage the maintenance of traditional culture values amongst the Lao citizens is also explored. Therefore, multiple methods were employed in order to enhance the validity of the findings. In other words, my study employed a quantitative approach, using questionnaires, to strengthen the reliability of a qualitative approach using three methods: TV diaries, focus groups, and in-depth interviews.

As Kellehear, Peace, and Willcocks (1990) stated, qualitative and quantitative data can cross-validate each other around “a common reference point” (p. 121). Using multi methods therefore involves both approaches: inductive and deductive reasoning (Krathwohl, 2004; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). Data triangulation is a means of assisting a researcher in the collection of data at differing times or from various sources (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2002). In a similar way, Devine and Heath (1999) found that “triangulation can be used effectively to explore the dynamics of complex social phenomena, highlighting the multi-layered and often contradictory nature of social life” (p. 49).

Alongside the uses multiple techniques or “within-method” triangulation (Denzin, 1978, p. 301), TV diaries, focus groups and a questionnaire survey were employed to investigate how Thai soap operas impact on Lao women’s sense of identity, agency, self-satisfaction, and social aspirations. Questionnaires were used to explore how Lao women watch Thai soaps. In addition, the TV diaries and focus groups aimed to analyse how the Lao female viewers perceive or interpret the content of Thai soap operas. The in-depth interviews placed an emphasis on how the Lao politicians acted as policymakers who construct and preserve the Laotian national and cultural identity, to examine how they deal with the impact of everyday transnational television consumption in Laos.

4.6 Ethical issues

In keeping with the rules relating to research involving human subjects, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, there are four ethical principles the researcher must uphold in qualitative research: informed consent, non-deception, respect for the privacy and confidentiality of participants, and a promise to collect and present reliable and valid empirical data (Webster, Lewis and Brown, 2013).

As the researcher, therefore, I was aware of these ethical issues, since this is a qualitative research project working with foreign people and policymakers. I therefore gained informed consent and the participants’ agreement before letting them become involved in the in-depth interviews and focus groups so as to respect the individuals’ rights to privacy, safety, and security. I also avoided causing any deception or harm while accessing or obtaining the data sources.

Furthermore, I made a commitment to protect the privacy of the focus group participants, TV diarists, politicians, and academics. Lastly, I ensured the accuracy and reliability of all the data collected and the presentation of that data since this demonstrated the quality, trustworthiness, and validity of the study. To this end, methodological triangulation cross-checked the study’s validity and trustworthiness. These issues were particularly critical as the fieldwork was carried out in Laos, a country with a different political regime from Thailand, my home country, and from the UK, where I study. Consequently, ensuring that participants in Laos came to no harm was very high on my agenda and made me mindful of any possible misinterpretation of this research.

Each project is unique, with its own aims and distinctions. Thus, each ethics form (such as for consent, information, and debriefing documents) needs to be tailored to the specifications of the respective project and its intended participants. To ensure that my research was a robust and ethically considerate project, I adhered to the Research Ethics Toolkit (18 December 2014) of Newcastle University (http://www.ncl.ac.uk/res/research/ethics_governance/index.htm). There is one piece of guidance to remember for all projects: every form used with the public should be written in plain language, free from jargon. It is important to ensure that the appropriate language or images are used according to the specific targeted social and/or age group of the participants.

The ethical procedures for this project were approved on 11 February 2015 by Professor Daniel Zizzo on behalf of the Newcastle University's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee. The project information sheet and consent form (see Appendix F and G) were prepared for all focus group, TV diary, and in-depth interview participants. In addition, the participants were given an information sheet which explained the aims and objectives of this research project. It informed participants that they had volunteered to join the research and were free to withdraw at any stage in their participation. It also informed them that the information they provided was anonymised and stored safely. All data and information from TV diaries, focus groups, and the in-depth interviews were kept safely on my university PC and on an external hard drive; nobody else can access this information. No participants with children in attendance or with any disabilities were included in the research.

I also provided an introductory page in the questionnaire to explain its objective, the details of each section, and the method for completing the questionnaire. All information provided by respondents was treated with the utmost confidentiality. The data will be kept securely until the research project has been completed, at which point the questionnaires will be shredded and the computer files deleted. The questionnaire respondents were able to withdraw and stop completing the questionnaires at any time.

After gathering the data, I offered the option of a debriefing for all participants: they were asked whether they required a debriefing and, regardless, were also informed that I would send them a summary of the findings. My study did not involve any physical danger or risks related to security of data and confidentiality. I assured the participants that all participation was of a voluntary nature, and I informed participants that they could withdraw from the project at any time, in which case their data would be deleted immediately.

My safety was a consideration in the risk assessment written for conducting fieldwork in a developing country. I began by coordinating with the Thai Royal Embassy in Vientiane and by asking permission from the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism. I also had a Lao coordinator to accompany me to official places and to the offices of the politicians. The issue of politics was also important due to Laos's political regime: Lao people and Lao officials were unwilling to talk about political issues and/or instances of corruption and oppression. They are likely not to criticise their own governments and others in terms of failures and conflicts. I thus did not engage in conversation about these issues with the Lao female viewers and politicians.

4.7 Researcher reflexivity

To double-check my research activities, data and the phenomena I encountered during the fieldwork, I used reflexivity as a methodological tool to better present, legitimise, and call into question my qualitative research data. Researcher reflexivity is widely recommended and accepted as an effective method of legitimising, verifying, and questioning research practices when conducting qualitative research. Before using the reflexivity methods, many researchers consider what they need to ask themselves and why.

Dewey (1938) writes that “to reflect is to look back over what has been done so as to extract the net meanings which are the capital stock of intelligent dealing with further experiences. It is the heart of intellectual organization and of the disciplined mind” (pp. 86-87). Callaway (1992) notes that “reflexivity becomes a continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness” (p. 33). Reflexivity is therefore conceived of as a process that entails sustained self-awareness throughout the study, revealing and describing the practice and construction of knowledge in the research with the aim of achieving more accurate analyses of the findings. As Davies (1999) states, “reflexivity, broadly defined, means a turning back on oneself, a process of a self-reference. In the context of social research, reflexivity at its most immediately obvious level refers to the way in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research” (p. 4).

Throughout the data collection process, I reflected on my position as a gendered subject, and also through my position in relation to my participants in terms of nationality, linguistic competence, and social and cultural background, as well as the physical context in which the data collection took place. These reflections are revisited in the following chapters of the thesis as they bear significant relevance to the analysis and interpretation of my findings.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has described the steps undertaken to address the research questions and sampling strategies involved. My study used a mixture of research methods. Questionnaires were used to explore the media consumption of particular Thai TV soap operas by Lao women in Laos. Also included were TV diaries and focus groups, designed to analyse the reception and understanding of representations of women in the Thai soap operas, and the ways in which they impact on Lao women's attitudes and perceptions of their agency and identity construction. I also carried out interviews with politicians and policymakers, as well as one academic in order to explore the influence of Thai transnational media on cultural policy-making in Laos. The methods section has also included details of the samples and the sampling technique used, as well as a description of procedures. The ethical considerations, triangulation for validity and reliability, and reflexivity, were also outlined. Combined, these considerations of data analysis provide the research methods of each fieldwork activity in my study. Thematic analysis, coding, deixis, themes, and statistics are all involved in the analysis of the data collected. The next chapter discusses the details of all the categories of analysis that were used to make sense of this research into cross-border and cross-cultural audience consumption and cultural policy-making.

Chapter 5. Soap Opera Consumption in Relation to Women's Aspirations and Their Satisfaction with Brand Names and Fashion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses Lao women's viewing habits relating to Thai television programmes, particularly soap operas. Lao state-owned television is regarded as inferior to Thai television, both from a technological perspective and also from the viewpoint of content. Hence most Lao people regularly watch Thai television (Stuart-Fox, 1998). Their media consumption is analysed in this research using Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding-decoding media texts model and the concept of uses and gratifications (U&G) introduced by Katz, Blumer and Gurevitch (1974) as an aspect of the media globalisation context of contemporary Laos. These approaches relate to the primary research question about what pleasures Lao women derive from watching Thai soap opera. Since the Laos government reformed the economy and its approach to trade and investment in 1986, an exchange of information with Thailand and other neighbouring countries has been gathering pace. Laos is in the process of modernisation and a variety of capitalist economic development. Laos's economic transition over the last 30 years has improved standards of living, particularly in the capital city, Vientiane, in which people are able to access the modern ideas and values diffused by global and regional media. Much of this regional media influence has come from Thailand, a country whose main commercial centres have been transformed by economic development, which has consequently brought significant socio-cultural transformation, especially with regard to modern, urban lifestyles (Vorng, 2011). Lao women as cross-cultural and cross-border audience and their attitudes to what they consume through foreign media are presented in section 5.2.

As with Thailand and other countries in the region, economic modernisation is leading to significant socio-cultural transformation in Laos (Pholsena, 2011; Bouté and Pholsena, 2017). The consumption of Thai television soap operas by Lao women in this study has become a useful lens to further examine the second sub-question about to what extent and how Lao women engage with and aspire to the forms of consumerism they see in Thai TV soap operas. Yet as an area of study it has not been given much academic attention. This chapter also highlights two themes in the patterns of Lao women's consumption. Firstly, the chapter examines Thai soap operas and consumerism; secondly, it looks at Thai soap operas and fashion

consumption, drawing on notions of how women's freedom, choice and empowerment are portrayed in entertainment media, as studied by the feminist scholars McRobbie (2008, 2009) and Gill (2007, 2016). Their approaches towards postfeminist media culture and consumer culture address issues of consumerism and femininity. In the context of the cultural experiences of global integration, Lao women's daily Thai soap opera consumption reflects two key themes: on the one hand, how they struggle with their aspirations for a better life, and, secondly, the extent to which they tie together this struggle with TV/media images of women living conspicuous lifestyles.

The Lao government, a unitary Marxist–Leninist single party Communist republic, perceives is concerned about a perceived threat to the national culture in the context of globalisation, most immediately the influence of Thai transnational television on its citizens. These concerns are covered in this study. My analysis of the politicians' attitudes addresses the second research question, namely how the Lao government attempts to subvert the cultural incursions of non-Lao TV shows, in other words, how the Lao government deals with the impact of the daily consumption of Thai TV soap operas by Lao women. The debate around TV politics and transnational consumptions by citizens is explored in section 5.3.

5.2 TV exposure behaviour, perspective and daily life

Lao women's consumption of Thai television, especially of Thai soap operas, seems to be unstoppable in the three main regional areas of Laos: Vientiane, Danthin village in Houayxay city, Bokeo province, and Bolikhamsai province in Pakxan district. As a result of the signal overflow effect (Sepstrup, 1989, 1990), Thai television signals can be received across Laos. The majority of participants in this study (95.6 per cent), across both urban and rural areas, are able to access Thai TV programmes easily through satellite television. Thaicom has a large number of Thai satellites and its network provides data and media services for South Asia and Southeast Asia, as well as for Australia and New Zealand's broadcast, entertainment, and telecoms industries via its broadband networks, giving Laotians convenient access to Thai television and other media. Moreover, historical cultural, linguistic and social links with Thailand mean that Laotians can watch Thai television programmes for free and for as long as they like.



Figure 5.1: Satellite TV-receiving antenna in Danthin Village, Houayxay City, Bokeo Province.

With regard to the demographic variables examined in this research (age, education level and occupation), my research offers one explanation for individuals' media usage and viewers' motives by employing the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory of individual needs and gratifications (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1974; Ruggiero, 2000). The findings of the questionnaire survey from 185 Lao female respondents support my prediction that Lao women are fond of Thai television soap operas.

| With Whom | Lao Female Viewers | |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------|
| | Frequency | Percent |
| Family | 135 | 73.0 |
| Friend | 15 | 8.1 |
| Alone | 35 | 18.9 |
| Total | 185 | 100.0 |

Table 5.1: Results showing who a group of Lao women watch Thai TV with

A full 73 per cent of women like to watch Thai television with their families, 18.9 per cent like to watch Thai television alone, and 8.1 per cent prefer to watch it with friends. In addition, 15 TV diary recordings and focus group discussions with 53 participants conducted here show that Lao women at any age from 18 to over 50, and of a variety of educational levels and occupations, all watch Thai television, particularly Thai soap operas. As Yam, who is one of my focus group samples, states, it is a widespread hobby:

I have been watching Thai TV for long time. I can say my Thai TV viewing started when my mum became pregnant (laughing). She loves watching Thai soap operas. Indeed, we used to watch black and white television in the past and we watch Thai TV with a colour and digital system just now. Thai TV is interesting and popular. (Yam, 22, employee, Houayxay)

Along with an examination of language familiarity, summed up in the concept “cultural proximity” (Straubhaar, 1991, p. 51), identification and distancing strategies (Chua and Iwabuchi, 2008) are used in my thesis to analyse the transnational television consumption of the Lao audiences. Eighty per cent of the participants and four of the fifteen TV diarists indicate that the language spoken in the soaps is easy to understand and that the quality of the Thai television signal determines whether they watch Thai soaps and other programmes. This correlates with the 15 young participants in urban areas who choose to watch Korean and Chinese series, and American films, that are dubbed into Thai. The (poor) quality of Lao TV programming might prove problematic. The participants explain that Lao voice actors and actresses are not as good as their Thai counterparts. They also watch Thai remakes of popular Korean dramas. The Lao audience is used to Thai because the Lao language is closely related to Thai; as Fry (2002) states, the Isan dialect spoken in the northeast of Thailand is, minor differences in vocabulary aside, virtually identical to Lao.

In addition, the participants read Thai magazines and books, visit Thai-language websites, listen to Thai songs, and follow Thai celebrities’ instgram and facebook pages. This indicates a saturation of Thai culture and can be explained by the concept of cultural hybridisation developed by Pieterse (2004, 2015) and Bhabha (2012). The importance of language similarity is a reason for watching Thai television in Laos, as a 31 year old teacher from Vientiane states:

The main reason I go for Thai soap operas is because of language understanding, the Thai and Lao languages are close but I have no idea about Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese. (Laddawan, 31, teacher, Vientiane)

The participants who have families watch Thai soap operas with their husbands and children: they partake in co-viewing with family members. They usually watch Thai soap operas at night in their bedrooms with their husbands before going to sleep. Television viewing has become a routine event in the Lao family home. Thus, television viewing has evolved as part of the domestication of the viewer’s lifestyle routine (Silverstone, 1994; Berker *et al.*, 2005). This

corroborates Bindah and Othman's (2011) and Lee's (2010) finding that audience activity, interacting with family TV viewing of everyday routines, can enhance family bonding.

An interesting finding of this study is that wives dominate the choice of television programmes, not their husbands. All twenty-three people with twenty focus group participants and three diarists who are mothers in Vientiane and up-country explain that they teach and discuss with their children the teenage problems that are covered in the soap operas. In this situation, the characters' experiences provide a form of 'distance learning' for Lao viewers. In addition, love and relationships are topical issues discussed by married couples. This family viewing pattern relates to Gillespie's (1995) work on Indian families' viewing of the Australian soap *Neighbours*. Therefore, beginning in the mid-1980s, when Laos began to liberalise and open up its economy to trade, investment and communications, the storylines of Thai television soap operas have become very influential in Lao family life and society (New Economic Mechanism: NEM).

Moreover, the scheduling of the soaps structures women's daily routines; the participants who are mothers have generally finished their work and family chores by the time the Thai soap operas are on-air, at around 8:30pm. They enjoy watching soaps on television in their living room. The scheduling strategies also reflect the target audiences as active female consumers from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. This concurs with earlier research on the influence of programme scheduling in regulating audience's times of viewing television dramas, relating to women's lifestyles and gender role (e.g. Robin, 1995; Johnson, 2005; Weissmann, 2013). Conversely, the eight young participants who were in their first job, and who come from both middle-class and working-class backgrounds in Vientiane, and the nineteen students, who own modern electrical devices bought by their parents, often access Thai soaps on YouTube on their laptops, tablets, and smart phones as this is their preferred way of accessing media and because the young workers often work overtime.

Alongside teenagers' and young adults' media consumption, the Internet and mobile phones also facilitate various ways of engaging with Thai media content in Laos, thus contributing to the modernisation of their lifestyles. The World Economic Forum reports an improvement in Lao's telecommunications infrastructure: numbers of mobile-cellar telephone subscriptions is 55.4 per cent, mobile-broadband subscriptions is 34.7 per cent, and Internet users is 21.9 per cent (The Global Competitiveness Index 2017-2018). My questionnaire survey shows that nearly 20 per cent of the young participants from Vientiane watch online Thai soap operas via

Internet/website (8.2 per cent), mobile phones (7.7 per cent), and tablet/iPad (3.8 per cent). As for elsewhere, teenagers in Laos associate such media with an increase in modernity (Drotner, 2000). New media technologies like mobile television are becoming an integral part of Lao daily life in the capital. This indicates the vital role of digital technology, with its key attributes of active and innovative devices (Choi, Kim and McMillan, 2009; Taneja and Mamoria, 2012), in bringing about new TV pattern viewing among young Lao women as a modern audience. The new electronic devices are seen as a new option in consuming media. In contrast, rural viewers continue to enjoy Thai TV soaps on television sets.



Figure 5.2: A female Lao vendor watching online Thai soap operas via her smartphone at the market (Ta-lad Chao), Vientiane City

Thai television soap opera viewing, and the viewing of other television programmes, has become a part of the participants' daily routines. Lao women are the most habitual followers of Thai television because of the high frequency and quantity of their viewing. Some 33 per cent of the women in this study watch Thai television for 2-3 hours every day, 23.8 per cent for 4-6 hours per day, 23.2 per cent of for 3-4 hours every day, and 14.6 per cent for more than 6 hours per day, with only 5.4 per cent of them watching for less than an hour per day.

Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) argue that an audience's TV viewings are linked to satisfaction and pleasures. Lao women's gratifications and motivations for Thai TV soap opera viewing are also associated with pleasant experiences. The participants appear to take pleasure in and find useful lifestyle advice from Thai soaps. The more Lao women consume Thai soaps, the more pleasures and satisfaction they obtain. This can be explained by their individual needs and sources of gratification (Palmgreen, 1984; Rubin and Windahl, 1986). The findings from my questionnaire survey regarding the amount of Thai soap operas Lao women have recently

watched show that the 50 highest Thai soap opera ratings provided by AC Nielsen in Thailand from 1 January 2014 to 8 December 2014. The research here found that 39.5 per cent of women watched an average of ten different soap operas over eleven months, 23.7 per cent viewed 11-20 soap operas within eleven months, 17.3 per cent viewed 21-30 soap operas within eleven months, 11.4 per cent viewed 31-40 soap operas within eleven months, and 8.1 per cent viewed 41-50 soap operas over eleven months. With Lao women's Thai TV soap viewing, their pleasures and specific preferences are determined by the comparisons they make between the portrayal of protagonists and their daily life in reality (Geraghty, 1991). In a sense, Lao women are likely to maximise their viewing pleasure by reading or understanding messages in soaps that are relevant to their experiences of acceptance, negotiation, and rejection in everyday life, as in Hall's (1980) encoding-decoding model.

It is not only primetime Thai soap opera programmes that are popular, but also Thai folk tale serials, which can be viewed in the morning and at the weekend and that are targeted at Lao children. Increasingly, the participants who are mothers also typically watch these Thai folk tale television serials. My participants who are mothers believe that the content is useful for developing moral judgement, gratitude and a knowledge of past ways of life. Mesilp (2002) points out that fantasy presentation in Thai folktales on television is a combination of traditional Thai presentation and the presentation of fantasy by modern technology, something which may attract children as an audience. My study shows that Lao women and their children watch Thai folk tale serials such as *Yor Pra Klin* (The beautiful woman with the aromatic scent named Yor Pra Klin, July 2014-March 2015), *Mon Nak Ka Rat* (The mantra of nagas, November 2014-July 2015), and *Keaw Na Ma* (The beautiful angel is cursed to be a working class woman named Keaw who has her face disguised as a horse, March 2015-March 2016). These Thai folk tale serials present special effects scenes, as they entertain their children with slightly surreal content and magic, such as people flying, body transfiguration and other supernatural abilities. As a 31 year old mother from Vientiane says:

For me personally I like Thai folk tales because they are appropriate for children and for unique cultural traditions and for amusement. The storylines and dialogue are plotted, showing issues like morality, sweet and sincere gratitude, and full of nostalgia as people reminisce about the past. Thus, on every morning weekend, my kids and I watch these TV serials on channel 7. My favourite one is 'Keaw Na Ma'. It is great fun with fantastic scenes. (Ki, 31, governmental officer, Vientiane)

Regarding the preference of drama genres, Thai folk television dramas are popular among Lao children and their mothers, corresponding with results in the findings from the questionnaire survey. There are three types of drama that are increasingly popular among Lao women: romantic comedy, action, and period/historical. The presence and importance of the cultural role of Thai folk tale television serials can be directly seen as influencing the participants' values and beliefs about merit, miracles, virtue and the beauty of children, which correlates with children's participation in beauty and merit activities (Apirattanapun, 2010). This is significant because children learn Thai values transmitted into the storylines and characters about Buddhist dharma and karma, for instance, that we should not judge people from their appearances because their actions and minds are more important than images.

The main reason that Lao women watch Thai soap operas is the storylines. Some 37.5 per cent of the questionnaire responses show that Thai soap operas are regarded as useful in that they can provide knowledge and advice about modern life that is relevant to people's lives. The storylines contain examples of good deeds and moral behaviour, which in turn can result in benefits such as her good life in return for being morally good, the sense that where there is a will there is a way, and the idea that true love can cope with any obstacle. The other reasons for watching them are related to the popularity of the actors and actresses (27 per cent), the soundtracks (15.2 per cent), the modern production values (9.7 per cent), the setting and location (7.1 per cent) and other things (3 per cent). In addition, all participants' written diaries express a preference for the heroine characters, who face many difficulties and successfully tackle them, in particular regarding family issues. It is argued here that women's characters and associated imagery as portrayed in Thai soaps by Thai actresses become role models for many female Lao viewers. This is similar to findings in previous research conducted in India that shows women viewers admire female characters who are able to change their roles to be more independent (Rajeshwari, 2015).

The Lao female audience is also interested in Thai news programmes. All participants clearly state that they watch Thai news on Channel 3, 'Rung Lao Chao Nee', every morning as a matter of routine. The news can broaden Lao viewers' understandings of the situation in neighbouring countries and about global events. They do not only watch hard news like politics and business but also follow 'soft news' such as entertainment news to obtain updates about their favourite Thai actors, about artists' work and for updates that might influence their personal lifestyles. The participants in my study see Thai news as a trustworthy and informative source of information. In addition, some serious news stories about crime and political corruption exposes

critical and negative social realities that they might never hear discussed in their own media due to government restrictions on Lao TV.

It can be argued here that Lao people trust Thai news because they are aware that their own news programmes are censored and controlled by the government. Lao television is directed as a cultural and political vehicle to promote and preserve pride in Lao society, as is the case for other regimes which share a similar ideology. For example, China and other communist countries have restrictive measures on national television stations (Zhang, 2011), in particular North Korean news programmes are strongly monitored to cement the government's rule and discourage dissent (Kang, 2007).

In accordance with Appadurai's (1990) observation that for the people of Sri Lanka Indianisation may be more vexatious than Americanisation. The wave of South Korean drama series for Japanese, Chinese, and Taiwanese viewers is a similarly controversial example of the cultural proximity of non-Western cultural flows (Yang, 2012). The circulation of TV programmes like Korean TV for East Asian viewers (Chu and Iwabuchi, 2008) also stir up attention to the influence of media globalisation and 'cultural imperialism' (Choi and Park, 2014). To explore the controversies surrounding the impact of Thai television on Laos, this research develops the term 'Thailandisation.' In this research, consumption of Thai TV soap operas and news programmes as media products and cultural resources is having a significant impact on how many Lao female viewers perceive the world and their own lives, in both urban and rural areas. The participants enjoy watching Thai soap operas partly because they adapt social events, facts, and news in an entertaining way. Thai soap operas often reflect a social and economic incident for their storylines and dialogues. That is, the participants watch factual news programmes which give them a lot to think about and which broaden their points of view. Thai television consumption by Lao women, therefore, is a combination of news programmes and soap operas which satisfies their desires for exposure to media in their daily lives. Therefore, Thailandisation is for Laotians a success in media consumption terms. Thailandisation, which has incidentally and indirectly impacted upon how female Lao consumers of media products understand their lifestyles, aspirations and goals, has been positively welcomed by those viewers.

However, the consumption of Thai news programmes by a tiny minority (3.7 per cent) of the audience should not be given more weight than given to the existing dominant global media flows. Three participants from the educated elites in Vientiane choose to watch HBO, CNN,

BBC news, and pop music from America and South Korea. This evidence shows that having studied abroad and a person's occupation are subjective criteria that affect their personal preferences for certain media, based on the audience reception (see Morley, 1992, 2006). In my study, educated Lao women with professional careers have more ability to access Western and American television than less-educated, working class Lao women. These women presumably have the capacity to enter follow modern lifestyles following their media consumption. Considering the concept of Americanisation (e.g. Webster, 1988; Pells, 1997), global media flows of huge news organisations and the entertainment industry continue to homogenise cultures and gain acceptance from Less Developed Countries (Schiller, 1976; Tomlinson, 1999; Thussu, 2007), including in Laos. As two participants explain to me:

For me, who studied abroad, I watch Thai news but I prefer foreign news from CNN, the BBC, and American series from HBO. (Nat, 32, governmental officer, Vientiane).

I always update myself on music videos from the West, America and Korea. They have modern styles of choreography and a great of rhythm which can be useful for my work. I like to watch documentary programmes, Thai news, and Thai movies and I also listen to Thai songs. (Annita, 25, singer and jewellery business owner, Vientiane).

5.3 The Lao government's views about the evaluation of Thai television

Legrain (2002) states that "globalisation is shorthand for how our lives are becoming intertwined with those of distant people and places around the world-economically, politically and culturally" (p. 4). However, The Lao government's views on Thai media is that it is not dissimilar to the model of Western influences, which Thai media has penetrated Laos society just as western media penetrated Thai society. The interviews with seven Lao policy makers shed light on how the government perceives the role of Thai television in contemporary Laos. The interviewees claim that Thai television has an increasingly important role to play in Lao people's daily lives because Lao television has restricted budgets, which limit the entertainment programmes they can make. The Lao government strongly agrees that Thai television is a part of Laotians' lives in both positive and negative aspects. The government regards Thai television as a news and entertainment content provider for the benefit of the state; it is seen as a technological, agricultural and medical resource, and a moral support which benefits their citizens. From this point, Thai television is considered as a dependable media source in Lao society.

However, the Laos government also claims that Thai television is a tool to broaden Western culture, which impacts on the identity of Thai viewers. The interviewees in the government do not specify the influence of Thai television soap operas on Lao viewers' cultural identity. They are very much of the opinion that the representation of Thai television leads to an undermining of pride in Lao cultural identity in terms of clothes and physical appearance. This position is held by the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, the Deputy Director General at Lao National TV, and the General Director of Performing Arts, who have the main responsibility for the control of Lao national television and the maintenance of national cultures. As Vice Minister of Information Culture and Tourism, Bouangeun Xaphouvong states:

Laotians consume Thai media to know the global situation that is occurring. Thai television can get to information faster than Lao news networks, and this is fact, which would let Laotians know what is going on in the world as it is happening. There are many shows that reflect good morals in society, shows about Buddhist dharma; this creates more awareness in Laotians about religion. There are also shows about agricultural productivity, selling agriculture products, medicine, and entertainment, etc. However, Thai television also presents the negative patterns of Western countries, which affect cultural identity. Thai people don't usually wear traditional or ethnic costumes. Thai actors and actresses don't look Thai. For the Thai media, I think it is better [than Laos] because writers, producers, and directors have a lot of knowledge and skills to make good shows. So Laotians also get to watch these shows and get the benefits as well. (Bouangeun, Vice Minister, Minister of Information Culture and Tourism, Member of Lao National Assembly and National Artist, interview)

As the Vice Minister explains above, the role of Thai soaps and other programmes is an undeniable part of people's daily lives in contemporary Laos. He regards Thai TV programmes as integrated with western/capitalist values, and his particular concerns are women's national identity and their physical appearances. His opinion reflects Lao cultural policy to resist the negative patterns of Western values and thereby the effects of Thai media representation on Lao viewers. In addition he admits that Thai media, including television, is popular in Laos due to the greater investment in production techniques and skilful staff. The deputy director general of Lao National Television's opinion about the economic disadvantage of TV entertainment programmes in Laos is similar. As Bounlap Douanghphoumy states:

Thai media plays an important role in Lao people's lives at the moment. Lao people have been watching Thai TV and it has become something that they can't live without [laughing] [...] Lao TV doesn't have enough budget to create interesting programmes such

as soap operas and game shows. (Bounlap Douangphoumy, Deputy Director General at Lao National Television, interview)

Moreover, Thai TV soap operas take part in Lao women's TV viewing in their regular routines. As Lao TV places certain limitations on various TV programmes, all young and adult Laotians typically watch Thai soaps as vehicles offering an opportunity to explore other's lives and for entertaining themselves. Thai soaps seem to satisfy them with a variety of storylines and the varied characteristics of actors and actresses. The popularity of Thai soaps among Laotians as audiences is still growing in both urban and rural communities in contemporary Laos. As Khamphouang Inthavongsy states:

In Vientiane and the countryside, adults and children will also keep up with Thai TV. They would like to know about drama series, the characters' lives and there are various types of Thai dramas. Some people have been watching from the start till the end. (Khamphouang Inthavongsy, General Director of Performing Arts Department, interview)

His opinion indicates the public acceptance of Thai television soap operas in Laos, reflecting their success. Thai soap opera offer a wide variety of genres - romance, action, period/history, and horror, as well as characters' personal appearances and lives, which engender a variety of reactions in Lao viewers: acceptance, negotiation and opposition (Hall, 1980). The following sections highlight Lao women's reception of Thai soap operas in terms of the consumption of luxury products and the aspirations to have fashionable clothes. In this context, the proposition here is that the 'accidental influence' of Thai television, or 'Thailandisation', has followed a western model in engendering a cosmopolitan outlook which targets a growing consumer market in wealthier cities such as Bangkok, and this is reflected in women's lives in a perceived expansion of female agency through consumerism, financial autonomy, independence and individualism.

5.4 Thai television soap operas and consumerism

Academic work on the media dimension of cultural flows has moved beyond a "one-way flow" from the United States to the rest of the world (Havens, 2006, p. 2). Examples of a symbolic contraflow of Western-dominant global flow of media include the "Korean wave" of media contents such as drama series and music, which are popular among the Asian diaspora (Yoon and Jin, 2016). Primetime serial fiction such as Brazilian telenovelas have also been exported

to Latin American nations because of cultural-linguistic similarities, challenging local media consumption as well as decreasing demand for US cultural products (Pastina and Straubhaar, 2005). In addition, cross-border trade in national television programmes in Europe (France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland) influences media industries in Europe and America (Kuipers, 2011).

Consumption plays a key role in modern Lao society and Lao audiences are saturated with Thai soap operas storylines and actresses encouraging material consumption (Tu Anh, 2015). The beautiful and rich female protagonists portrayed in soap storylines usually have brand name accessories and wear fashionable clothes. They are in the vanguard of extravagant lifestyles. Eighty per cent of participants in my study were determined to have more money, to possess more luxury products, and to enjoy a more modern lifestyle, which, in their eyes, is equated with consumerism. Materialism is a belief that acquiring material objects or money is one of the primary markers of happiness and success (Scoot, Martin and Schouten, 2014). This section therefore identifies and analyses some major socio-cultural factors influencing the rapid growth of consumerism in Laos in order to understand how Thai soap operas encapsulate the hopes, aspirations and expectations of material possessions for the participants across all regional areas and social backgrounds.

As an example of this, during my fieldwork in Vientiane City, I met a 26 year old female cleaner at the small hotel where I was staying. She tried to give me money to buy her the face powder and whitening lotion made by a brand that was advertised by her favourite Thai actress. She asked me: 'Help me to get some cosmetic products; I want to have an aura of white skin like Aum Patcharapa'. Very possibly, the influence of this Thai actress is encouraging a type of consumerism in women's lifestyles. Hence, an important sub-theme of primary research question emerged: to what extent do viewers aspire to or reject the consumerism they see in programme content?

I have therefore made the assumption that young Lao women who live in Vientiane, the capital city, are taking up employment and becoming educated, that they may have more choices in their personal lives and family relationships in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the big city. At the same time, they may or may not desire the modern lifestyle of fashionable clothes, brand name products and beauty ideals as presented in the Thai television soap operas which they consume on a daily basis. In addition, the group of middle-class and upper-class Lao women who work in the entertainment industry and also have experiences of studying and working

abroad may apparently embrace contemporary lifestyles, including material consumption.

5.4.1 *Desire for luxury brand names vs. a feeling of well-being*

The first group of women in my study who become real consumers (that is, those who have purchasing power and have a high level of material possessions) are upper-class, or ‘elite’ women. Eight focus group participants (15 per cent) are business owners, successful professionals, government officers, artists and celebrities. They all have personal incomes of at least 20 times the national average and they identify with Thai celebrities, actors, actresses, singers, and entrepreneurs. Most of them graduated with at least a Bachelor’s degree, and some of them studied abroad, including in Thailand. Although these elites are a minority group in Lao society, they are representative of how Laos is becoming modernised, and how the consumption of luxury goods has become a social phenomenon in Laos, influenced to no small degree by the Thai media, particularly Thai soap operas. Thai soaps are an important method of portraying consumerism and wealth to the participants. Two young celebrities expound on their materialistic lifestyles:

I love shopping, but there are only a few shops in Laos, so I often fly to shops in Bangkok and Hong Kong because of my jewellery business involvement. I choose to purchase just two brand name products: Chanel is my favourite brand for handbags; and Kerb [shoes] too. (Annita, 25, singer and jewellery business owner, Vientiane).

I choose to consume good quality products like brand name goods. I think brand name items make me feel more self-assured and happy. It helps to make me more confident and boosts my image. I also love travelling so much because I really adore beautiful scenery, and like taking photos. On my monthly journey, I firstly consider that the hotel I stay in should provide excellent service, and be surrounded with shopping areas and good coffee shops. As you can see on my Instagram, I often update and post photos about my lifestyle there. (Lingling, 23, 2nd runner up Miss International Queen 2014, model, actress, Vientiane)

The increasingly confident voice of these cosmopolitan elite Lao women shows that their consumerism leads to privileged lifestyles. The participants who come from the media and business sectors obtain the opportunity of career advancement at salaries that increase their chances of enjoying conspicuous consumption abroad. Their contemporary lifestyles are presented by the French brand name, Chanel, which serves their taste for elegance in handbags

and shoes, reflecting their financial independence and boosting their self-confidence and agency. They also endorse the media portrayal of an empowered lifestyle presented by travelling, staying in four or five star hotels, and relaxing at coffee shops in foreign countries, which enables them to transform their mundane lifestyles into adventurous ones. Following Bourdieu (1984), I argue that the elite Lao participants' practices use their consumption practices to reinforce and enhance their 'cultural capital' in order to distinguish themselves as a superior class. Their expensive global products, diplomas, careers and a very luxurious taste are considered as a primary marker of existing class inequality in contemporary Laos.

According to Chadha and Husband (2010), in today's Asia you are what you wear, as people in Japan, China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand think that extravagant fashion brands define their identity and social status. The parallel behaviours between conspicuous consumption and photo sharing as a tool to build self-actualisation is common among elite Lao women. They post pictures of their lifestyles and the brand name items that they have bought to show their friends and followers on social media. Wiedmann, Hennings, and Siebels' work (2007) claims that when luxury brands and products have the power to indicate elite values, social referencing and image, people feel the desire to own and pose with their luxury fashion possessions in public to indicate symbolic sign of group membership.

Furthermore, with regard to the possession of personal luxury brands, people who are the owners and purchasers of original luxury fashion brands believe that possessing them gives them overwhelming satisfaction, encourages warm feelings towards them, and allows them to be adored and accepted by others (Nia and Lynne Zaichkowsky, 2000). In this sense, young upper-class participants who have careers and who are financially comfortable also purchase luxurious products to display their successful lives and to raise themselves into the higher social class. Regarding their soap viewing, they accept the costumes of leading female protagonists and their matching accessories and regard them as must-have items. The upper-class participants update their ideas about global fashion trends from Thai actresses.

Ostentatious consumption plays an important role in reflecting preferences in a product's purchase and consumption in public contexts. Gill (2007, 2016) argues that women's agency as expressed through consumerism, relating to individualism and empowerment, is portrayed in mainstream media constructions of class and success, but that such portrayals overlook women's rights, power and opportunities in reality. In my study, luxury and brand name

consumption is more likely to be important for elite Lao women who are eager to gain social status and recognition in society because it is an avenue of self-expression and affords a sense of personal agency. It is accepted that the upper-class women gain their agency and freedom through their consumption of fashion items. The more recognised they want to be, the more they engage in acts of conspicuous consumption. Since consumer culture, in particular through advertising and television shows in Western societies, identifies symbolic images of the good life (Dittmar, 2007), Thai television soap operas also play an important role in teaching Lao female viewers to live a cosmopolitan lifestyle; in other words, they learn how to achieve “living the good life” through media consumption (Martin and Lewis, 2018, p. 13).

The second group, 30 per cent of my participants, are young middle-class women with professional careers, and are much more embedded in consumer society than the first group of elite women. The aspirations of these fourteen participants are based on consumption of luxury items like those they see in Thai soaps. Very expensive luxury goods are out of the financial reach of these participants, so counterfeit luxury products are often bought instead. The participants focus on the modern lifestyle of being good-looking women who possess and display luxury products. They regard luxury goods as part and parcel of what it means to be a modern female, with one 27 year old accountant stating:

Brand name goods on soaps are amazing but their prices are very high. I have no chance now to wear diamond earrings and bracelets like we see in soaps. It doesn't matter, as I always try to mix and match actress's modern outfit styles. I buy a handbag and sunglasses like theirs and use them when I need to hang around with friends or travel. With regards to my mobile phone, I prefer the iPhones to Samsung. They are multi-functional and very beautiful. I have owned an iPhone 16GB for 3 years. (Nook, 27, Accountant, Vientiane)

The purchase of these brand name products gives these middle-class participants a thrill to emulate the glamorous lifestyles and consumerism they see Thai actresses portraying in soap operas. Despite financial constraints, they negotiate the contemporary styles of Thai actresses' fashion and accessories by purchasing a mix of mainstream and local market styles. In my study, counterfeit products are considered symbolic artefacts to upgrade Lao women's social class and help to boost their confidence. Previous research has acknowledged that this consumer behaviour, which uses counterfeit luxury goods, stimulates consumer demand for real brand name items (Givon *et al.*, 1995; Nia and Lynne Zaichkowsky, 2000), and the counterfeit items

will have symbolic value for the customers who buy them with the desire of enhancing their social status. As a 25 year old lawyer and a 26 year old teacher from Vientiane state:

At this time, this Chanel brooch and these Dior earrings are very popular in Thailand among actresses on TV, so I decided that I must buy them; this brooch makes me more pretty and conspicuous, but I bought it from the Thai border at the market. I think fashion and beautiful accessories always make me confident, good looking, and high-class. (Kratat, 25, lawyer, Vientiane)

Whenever there are popular Thai soap operas being broadcast, I usually see the costumes and accessories of the actresses on sale here, in similar styles. Even the brand name handbags that they all carry, we have every single brand at Talad Chao [a market] but they are made in China; they are not genuine. I sometimes buy very chic clothes, glasses and shoes like them because I want to be good looking like Chompoo Araya and Aum Patcharapa [acclaimed Thai actresses]. (Parn, 26, teacher, Vientiane)

Moreover, the young middle-class women in my study tend to purchase products seen in placements as a marketing tool by female soap characters in order to boost their confidence. Thai actresses' stylish accessories and fashionable clothes push Lao women to desire the character's brand name items. The popularity of product placements in television sitcoms show the relation between consumer attachment to the characters and sales of those products (Tueth, 2000; Russel, Stern and Stern, 2006).

The third group in my study, 55 per cent of the sample, consists of rural women from the lower class who have low incomes, received no higher than a secondary education and work as agricultural labourers, vendors and employees, and who cannot spend money on unnecessary items. Aspiration is an important element for women from the lower-class group. Travelling or eating out for recreation is out of their reach; however, they hope that someday they will "become rich and have many possessions". At this point, the financial difficulties stimulate the participants to learn about planning carefully how to spend money on goods and brands, which may link to the feasibility of their sustainable well-being in the longer term. A 32 year old employee from Houayxay explains to me:

Nang-Aek [the leading protagonist in a Thai soap] has many beautiful dresses, shoes and handbags. She even has a special room to keep them in. Her bedroom is very beautiful and very large. I just want to have my own bedroom; it does not have to be as large as hers. I will definitely have or buy it someday when I have enough

money. My goal is to be rich, not to look rich. (Ya, 32, employee, Houayxay)

Furthermore, 40 per cent of the lower-class participants, who in recent years were living in extreme poverty, are now in a position to improve their quality of life and social agency. This is partly a result of their engagement with soap opera storylines. They were not able to participate in and benefit from education, physical health and employment. They admit that Thai soap operas portray a beautiful and successful life of money and possessions, and that this has made them aspire to have a better life. They then decided to work in Thailand in order to gain higher wages and to experience the benefits of urban society. In a sense, the participants obtain the belief from Thai soap operas that working hard will turn their lives around and let them see a way from their current disadvantageous circumstances. In other words, the lower-class participants recognise one of the underlying moral themes of the Thai soaps: being patient and persevering to overcome their personal and social problems.

An end to poverty may increase awareness of women's gender equity in wider society. This case study of the lower-class participants shows the poverty and the narrow choices available to Lao women today in achieving agency and personal autonomy. Seemingly, Thai soap operas' storylines relate to their personal spheres and encourage them see consumerism as a means of achieving a sense of independence and freedom. However, gender inequalities lie deeper than opportunities for material consumption, but are intimately bound up with educational opportunities and career advancement, and hence consumerism itself would be a poor substitute as a vehicle for expanding agency¹⁶. They make their own choices not only to work and earn a living, but also purchase a few luxuries and plan in detail with their partners. Since valuable lessons provided by how female characters' tackle daily issues they encounter are mediated through their TV viewing, this helps to inspire and facilitate solutions to financial and marital problems for them. As two participants in rural cities note:

When I was young, I watched Thai lakorn [soap operas]. I wished to go to Thailand at the time for travelling, shopping, and having a happy life as an actress. After working in Bungkan [a province in Thailand] for nearly 4 years, my dream came true. I earned money to support my life and family. I worked hard for a bright future, to have a large house. I now have my own personal beautiful bedroom

¹⁶According to the Gender Resource Information and Development Centre (GRID) (2006), a lack of education and economic opportunities and limited access to resources drive Lao women into informal workers. Lao women comprise more than 90 per cent of vendors in fresh food markets across the country (UN Women, 2017)

with many teddy bears and dolls. I will choose a good, honest and selfless person to stay with me. (Kade, 32, cloth vendor, Bolikhamsai)

Watching some Thai lakorn [soap operas] involves putting aside difficulties and extreme poverty and trying to understand my situation deeply. An actress in a role as street vendor progresses to a life which is better, easier and richer thanks to her patience and desire to do good things. It relates to my life [...] I am proud of myself that I have earned money. I also have a house, a Toyota Pickup [Vigo] and a good husband. I do imitate Nang-Ake's achievement [a female protagonist]. (Kanthali, 31, fruit and vegetable vendor, Houayxay, Bokeo).

However, age difference seen as a major characteristic has made the participants aware of cultural values and material possessions. The small group of participants aged over 50 and from the low-class group (10 per cent) in Houayxay city, Bokeo province, argue that the image of a luxurious life shown in Thai soap operas is fiction or fantasy and will never happen in real life. They understand the differences between urban and rural contexts and they believe that the joy of life is simplicity with sufficiency of resources in the countryside. Elderly women are conservative and have a frugal lifestyle. In a sense, they refuse or speak against the Western consumer-oriented lifestyle that is founded on purchasing and possessing luxurious items. They are not preoccupied with consumerism but with time-honoured values. Arguably, the modern life portrayed in Thai soap operas has not made these women gain in consumer visibility. The comment of a 52 year old farmer shows that she cannot afford luxurious products due to her inadequate income:

I was born poor. It is obviously different from Thai soap operas. All the people in them are affluent and have happy lives, but they are envious of each other, even of their own family. The poor rich! I am pleased with my life because my two daughters have already married good guys, and I have two lovely grandchildren. I also have my own house and land for rice farming. It is enough for me. We do not have lots of money, yet our lives are healthy and happy. It is a kind of unexpected freedom. (Somjit, 52, farmer and housewife, Houayxay, Bokeo)

Furthermore, the norm in traditional Lao society is a key principle led up to elderly women's choices of peaceful life. They believe that once people knows when to enough, there will be no consequence of problem like act of greed and jealousy. Therefore, they refuse luxurious lifestyles of female characters, but content with humble and happy lifestyles. They seem to understand that money cannot buy happiness. Nevertheless, those old generation ideas may not be fully conserved by young participants as they get older. Since the different views of younger

participants on cosmopolitan lifestyles in consumerism presented in Thai soap operas expand their ability to earn, to purchase, and to decide their own life in order to enhance happiness, self-satisfaction and social aspiration, which go beyond conventional social norms.

In summary, Thai soap operas are an important method of portraying consumerism to Lao women. Since initiating economic reforms in the mid-1980, poverty has declined and living standards have improved in Laos (World Bank and Asian Development Bank 2012; Bouté and Pholsena, 2017). Economic ideologies such as materialism/consumerism and moneyism are portrayed in Thai TV soap operas (Soontornviriyakul, 2008). Through these values, participants are encouraged to appreciate the beauty of luxury goods, particularly members of the financially-rich elite from Vientiane city. The middle-class participants consume luxury goods to enhance their status by purchasing some counterfeit products according to their limited incomes. They purchase and combine use of bona fide brand names with counterfeit products. For low-income groups or the working-class participants from rural areas, the luxury products and modern lifestyles seen in Thai soap operas stimulate and encourage them to work hard and earn a lot of money so that they can someday experience leisure and luxury consumption. In contrast, the elderly working-class participants who come from a humble, unprivileged background refuse the conspicuous consumption portrayed in Thai soaps due to their financial constraints.

Another prominent area, in addition to the consumerist lifestyles and aspects of social status which Thai soap operas uphold for young Lao women as audiences, is their agency and choices in fashionable clothes. How Lao women interpret female protagonists' clothing styles in their consumption of Thai TV soap operas will be discussed next.

5.5 Thai television soap operas and the choice between modern and traditional clothes

Another theme that emerges from this study is that Lao women from all three socio-economic groups admire and desire the clothes that they have seen Thai actresses wearing. Thai soap stars who achieve international celebrity become style icons for Lao women. Their consumption has a visible and measurable impact, mainly on Lao women's clothing today; in particular, young women are apt to express themselves and exhibit their individual freedom through expressing their clothing choice. Self expression through clothing can be seen as a manifestation the rising consumption patterns across the country as the country develops along capitalist lines which

entwines values of freedom with consumerism and shapes a concomitant sense of self-identity and society (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001).

This section covers the increasing popularity of fashionable women's clothing. I argue that the use of traditional clothing, or Lao sinh [sarongs], as an element of culture and national identity is both influenced and challenged by fashionable Western clothing as an increasingly higher value is placed on modern fashion trends largely through Lao women's consumption of Thai soap operas. In contrast, the Lao government has sought to regulate this aspect of the globalisation of styles and trends by monitoring what is deemed to be unsuitable clothing as well as by regulating the use of sinhs in Lao women's lives. Two sub-questions are considered here: firstly, how do contemporary Lao women dress in their daily lives? Secondly, how does the Lao government maintain the use of the sinh in practice? The dichotomy between traditional dress and fashionable clothes is also discussed.

5.5.1 Lao traditional dress, government policy and social norms

Clothing is generally regulated by social and political power: state power and authority, social norms, gender, social status and class (Storm, 2013). Sinh usage in Lao women's everyday lives – for social status, rituals, and festivities - is in transition at the moment, as Lao is moving towards a market-oriented economy and associated transformations in social relations (Tagwerker, 2009). This study explores traditional dress as an aspect of cultural preservation which seeks to maintain a balance between tradition and modernisation in conditions of cultural hybridity.

Lao women feel a personal urge to wear sarongs, or sinh, in order to maintain their cultural and national identity. In traditional Lao beliefs, women are confined to the secular world as mothers of the nation, while men are seen as members of a sacred world or monks (Dhamija, 2010). In this sense, Lao women are required to dress appropriately by wearing traditional sinh¹⁷ when attending a funeral, a wedding ceremony, or for making merits at temples. Lao women's clothes are traditionally designed not to attract sexual interest, regulated by both policies and social norms.

¹⁷ According to Berg Encyclopaedia of World Dress and Fashion Vol.4 in Southeast Asia (2015), Lao women use a tube skirt form to wrap the lower body, covering an end in at the waist to ankle, called sinh or pha sin and pha sarong. Lao sinh is divided into three components, referred to as Hua-sinh (head), phuen sinh (body), and tin sinh or foot of the sinh (base). The three parts are woven separately and then sewn together.

This research subscribes to the argument that individualist beliefs, associated with capitalist society and economy, emanate from Western communities which are marked by a modernity that is rooted in individualism and the pursuit of self-interest. This embedded value of individualism is often counterposed with ‘Asian values’, which are, further, often said to be challenged by the globalisation of western values. Consequently, to build a sense of Lao nationhood, nation-state building and national identity, the government of Lao PDR has engaged in many projects to accelerate the growth of economy, initially through a socialist framework (Jerndal and Rigg, 1998; Bourdet, 2000; Yamada and 山田紀彦, 2013) and more recently by opening up its economy to foreign trade and investment. However, the dilemma facing the regime is that this economic liberalisation and transformation, coupled with modern communication technologies, is accompanied by a transformation of social values and norms. Thai media, particularly entertainment TV programmes such as soap operas, have become one of the main conduits of the promulgation of these hitherto alien social values in Laos. As the Vice Minister in the Ministry of Information Culture and Tourism states:

It is not only the Thai media, but media around the world that has an impact on Lao culture. We cannot say which media are good or bad, but what really affects Lao people is the different cultures that Laotians absorb from watching international media. Look at clothing, for example: we want Laotian women to dress politely and not wear clothes that reveal too much of their body. Contrast this with Western culture, where people are free to wear what they want because Western culture is concerned more with their rights, while we Asians are more interested in national interests, and these two philosophies don’t go together. (Bouangeun Xaphouvong, Vice Minister, Ministry of Information Culture and Tourism, Member of Lao National Assembly and National Artist, interview).

Evidently, the Lao state has sufficient power to enforce the use of the sinh through sociocultural activities. The Lao sinh is worn as a stylish uniform with a white blouse by female school students from primary school to university. Working or visiting official places also requires the donning of the sinh as part of the everyday outfit of ordinary Lao women and Lao women also wear sinh for occasional ceremonies. In other words, the Lao sinh as a cultural symbol is being incorporated in the development of Lao economy. In the meantime, Lao sinh usage is used as a cultural tool for preserving national identity and culture by the Lao government. Gill (2016) notes that celebrities’ stylish clothes portrayed in the mainstream media are a reflection of consumerist values rather than a representation of female empowerment and autonomy. The Lao sinh thus has plays a basic role today in the preservation of local culture, which the

government sees as being eroded by the increasing popularity of fashionable western clothes and trends.

In this sense, wearing a Lao sinh in schools and governmental offices is a political and cultural statement. It has been appropriated as a medium through which Lao ethnic identity is preserved and displayed. Therefore, the Lao sinh is promoted with the objective of stimulating a process of nation-building, nationalism and national pride in Laos. Additionally, the use of this Lao traditional attire has a particular role to play in the preoccupation with cultural policy. It is clear that Lao sinh usage is a defence against Western domination of fashion.

In spite of the requirement to wear the Lao sinh as a symbol of Lao traditional cultural heritage, forty-two participants state that they are beginning to adopt Western-style clothing styles, especially the younger generation, who want to wear them in their daily lives. From this contradiction between traditional and modern dress, a compromise of sorts can be seen in the merging of the Lao sinh with Western-style tops, which have merged to a form of cultural hybridity in fashion.

In short, the sarong culture is being challenged by fashionable clothes in modernity-conscious Lao women. These women, as wearers of both traditional and modern clothes, are exposing the global-local negotiation based on considerations between national identity and the desire to consume global fashion, indicating the clothes symbolic status within the context of identity formation. Lao women in this study have also created mixed identities through their use of both the traditional sarong and modern outfits; in other words, they are embracing the notion of the hybridity of dress (Hansen, 2004).

5.5.2 Lao women's clothing today and changes in the form of traditional dress

According to McRobbie's (2008) work on young women and consumer culture, women with educational qualifications, careers and higher incomes have more opportunities to follow the new pattern of fashion consumption through reading fashion magazines and watching television programmes. The popularity of fashionable clothes is a clearly observable phenomenon in Lao women's lifestyles, especially among young women. Whilst their national identity is being shaped, the sight of trendy clothes from Thailand in Thai television soap operas inspires Lao women and triggers a desire to be differently attired than their fellow Lao citizens. Forty Lao women in this research are absorbed by the images of Thai actresses and Thai singers on their

televisions. I argue in my study that wearing a sinh or Lao sarong is currently under negotiation between pride in nationhood, and freedom of choice on the other. In this event, Lao women's clothing today emphasises hybrid cultural identities as 'stylish and sinh style' at once. This section addresses the ways Lao women audiences deal with the contradictions of state regulation and how they view or interpret national identity.

Sixty per cent of the participants state that they always regard new cultures entering into Lao society as not being more or less superior and not necessarily superior to their own original or native culture based on traditional religious ideals. One can explain that the flows of television drama series across national, cultural and linguistic boundaries in East Asia have been characterised "as a self-aware but non-consensual force field articulated by the region's mixed postcolonial experiences, negotiation with globalisation, and interacting media cultures" (Tsai, 2005, p. 102). Factors such as the proximity of state control in the capital city, social status, economic power and occupations explain why the majority of Lao women in this study both identify with fashionable clothes portrayed by Thai actress and express themselves by maintaining their traditional sarongs. Lao women's clothing is a fascinating mix between of and modern styles, similar to the "hybrid cultural identity on the fashion clothing" between Anglo and American culture of Hispanic teenagers (Chattalas and Harper, 2007, p. 351).

Thai actresses' costumes in television dramas are very popular with Lao women, with more than half of the participants from urban and rural areas having purchased clothes similar to those of their favourite stars, and these are usually brand name items. To some extent, consumerism and status has become commonplace in modern Laos (O'Cass and Frost, 2002; Goldsmith *et al.*, 2010; Hume, 2010 and Sheth *et al.*, 2011). Fashionable clothes are adopted to display an individual's status and accomplishments to others (Husic and Cicic, 2009), and in this way consumers are purchasing both clothes and an 'identity'; hence, there is a correlation between a person's identity and brand name popularity, influenced by the role of European fashion styles and celebrity endorsement (O'Cass and McEwen, 2004; Tungate, 2008).

However, participants' careful considerations about citizenship, with its accompanying strands of national pride, Asian manners, social norms, and traditions, which are mainly cultivated within Lao educational institutions and Lao media, are positive influences on the participants' decision-making for the ideal usage of the sinh. In this sense, the Lao sinh is an integral part of Lao national women's dress and represents their symbolic role in the nation, while modern and fashionable clothes, which are popular because of Thai television (particularly Thai soap operas)

are seen as a way in which the participants display their identity through alternative outfits in their daily lives. In this study, women in three socio-economic groups have different perceptions of wearing the Lao sinh, corresponding to the government policy of using women as signifiers of nationhood and tradition.

Firstly, five of the upper-class group of young adults (such as businesswomen, actors, singers and models) appreciate and wear both fashionable clothes presented by Thai actresses and their traditional dress usage. They conform to the government regulations of traditional clothes and show this by wearing the sinh [sarong] for special occasions. Meanwhile, they routinely wear brand name fashionable clothes in everyday life and purchase them from Western and Thai designers at shopping malls in Thailand, in particular the luxurious Siam Paragon in Bangkok. They utilise both fashionable clothes and Lao sinh to maintain positions of high status in their communities. The Lao elites' social status and public standing are expressed by elegant sinh and expensive modern clothes to display their class and power. The upper-class women also manage to express their status and uphold a sense of national pride at the same time by wearing high-quality and high-priced sinh (woven by Lao silk and intricately embroidered) at wedding ceremonies, religious activities and when attending formal meetings with governmental officials. Elite Lao women were addressed by the government as consumer-citizens in the sense that they were regarded as the backbone of the economic-cultural success of the Lao sinh. Their choices and individual autonomy in fashion consumption are readily invoked in terms of the roles and social responsibilities cultivated as an ideal of femininity and womanhood. As a singer notes:

I buy some brand name trendy clothes but just moderate brand names, not high or luxury brands. When I need to go to a party or commercial event, I usually consider the theme or dress code of each event. I will typically buy clothes from overseas during my travels. The most expensive item of clothing that I possess is my sarong, which I bought for my wedding ceremony. I decided to invest in buying a premium sinh because it is often needed in religious ceremonies and for meetings with governmental officials. Everyone has to wear a sarong. (Annita, 25, Singer, Vientiane)

Secondly, twelve middle-class teenagers and young adult workers living in Vientiane who express Thai celebrity-like attitudes still wear sinh as the cultural uniform of college students and governmental officials. The participants realise that sinh wearing is seen as a cultural tool for the preservation and maintenance of women's cultural identity, but they also follow trendy new clothing that they see in Thai TV soap operas. That is to say, they negotiate between their

desires for personal choice in fashionable clothes by following both famous Thai leading actresses and the government's cultural policy of retaining tradition. The Lao students and government officers acting as 'cultural keepers' conform to the social norms to carry 'nationhood' while also acting as consumers in their desire for and purchase of the fashions they see Thai actresses wearing. They also wear fashionable clothing in order to show their agency and enjoyment (Jackson *et al.*, 2012). As two participants explain to me:

I have tried to adopt a style of dressing from Thai soap operas, a process of working the characteristics of Thai stars into my life. I do like fashionable clothes. It is my enjoyment of pleasant clothes... for my outfits in weekday, I wear sinh counted in a uniform manner to ensure cultural identity of Lao women. (Laddawan, 31, teacher, Vientiane)

We copy the clothing styles and fashion in Thai soap operas which first gave us the idea of mixing and matching. We can also adopt this in daily-life situations. But my student uniforms are more important, they're highly uniform, not beautiful. It is a basic rule for us [and we] which must follow the school discipline. (Pla, 25, student, Vientiane)

The effect of the portrayals of women in Thai soaps has resulted in Lao women ceasing to wear traditional clothes or Lao sinh as everyday dress; rather, it is only worn in schools and universities, to work-related functions or on government business, and to attend special occasions such as rituals and festivals. Public awareness of the sinh as a cultural tool is well maintained by social norms and cultural practices, which are connected with religion. In contrast, fashionable clothes and beauty are used to project their image, self and identity, and they have become a crucial factor in women's choice of attire (Walseth, 2006; Sandikci and Ger, 2010).

As noted, in their social life these participants use both fashionable clothes and the sinh, with the latter being used with the aim of preserving national and cultural identity, while they wear fashionable clothes to demonstrate their Western values and display their success, wealth, and prestige to others (O'Cass and Siahtiri, 2013). This study suggests that most participants are very much in-between identities: free enough to wear fashionable clothes, but not yet independent enough to reject the tradition of the sinh, as there is a cultural policy of traditional clothing for women in strictly defined places such as schools and government buildings. This suggests that there is a preferred hierarchy and that 'independence' is positively correlated with a rejection of national culture and identity.

Thirdly, 15 per cent of young participants belonging to the working-class social group and living in Bolikhamsai (which is quite a distance from central state control and where the participants' jobs are not related to government business, even schooling) identified a significant change in the tradition of sinh usage by Lao women. They resist the state policy of sinh wearing. In this sense, the notion of detraditionisation proposed by Giddens (1991) emerges in rural areas of Laos such as Bolikhamsai, where individual young rural women appear to be greatly influenced by the global culture of fashion via their Thai soap viewing. The less-educated young participants aged 18 to 35 years old found, for example, ready-to-wear clothing and fashionable clothes captivating. In spite of the fact that they cannot afford the original clothes, they choose to buy counterfeit clothes instead. They act as modernisers regarding fashionable clothes, which are considered a symbol of self-empowerment and an expression of self-identity. Three young employees from Bolikhamsai explained:

I think we have changed many things from the past, for example, we do not wear sarongs like my parents or grandparents do. I am interested in fashionable clothes. You know, I used to wear trousers like Nang-Ake [a Thai protagonist] in Ta-wan tor Sang. It looks cool, modern and gorgeous. I really like her suits too; she is a smart woman. (Sa, 21, restaurant employee, Bolikhamsai)

I immensely like shopping for clothes, dress creatively and I'm all about beauty. I really want to have everything Nang-Ake, Chompoo [a famous Thai actress] possesses, including her dresses, handbags and shoes. I typically wear relaxed and casual styles such as jeans, or shorts with T-shirts in a single day. I wear sinh rarely, even in temple. (Kate, 18, restaurant employee, Bolikhamsai)

I'd love to be seen wearing fashionable clothes all the time but I don't have enough income to afford it. Nang-Ake [a Thai protagonist] has gorgeous and classy dresses, as does Aum Patchrapa [a famous Thai actress], and I want to copy her dresses. I often adopt her style for my daily clothes' development to look fashionably different from others. (Bee, 25, restaurant employee, Bolikhamsai)

The participants' choices of clothing styles are deliberately used to re-create their identities in order to show how they express both a personal sense of fashion and to conform to the expected norms and markers of official national identity in the context of modernisation. The clothes of Lao women and men in their daily lives are summarised and compared in Table 5.2. This comparison also includes whether it is their personal agency or an institution that determines, influences and controls the participants' choices in terms of dressing in public. These results were produced by asking the participants and Khongphat Luangrath, Lao academician and print making artist, about their outfits. Fashionable clothes indicate a transformation of Lao women's

identity, whereas wearing the sinh acts as a ‘cultural marker’ that sees them acknowledging the political and cultural management of Laos’s national identity.

| Activities | Occupations | Lao women’s clothes | Lao men’s clothes | Institution or Agency |
|--|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Daily leisure time and travelling | All | Fashionable clothes | Fashionable clothes | Self-decision |
| Going to school | Students | Sinh and a uniform with white shirt | Trousers, a uniform with a white shirt | Ministry of Education |
| Visiting the governmental buildings | All | Sinh | Trousers and Lao silk or cotton shirt, or suits | Lao government |
| Attending the temple or participating in official religious activities | All | Sinh | Lao silk or cotton shirt with breast cloth draped over shoulder (Pa-Bieng), fashionable clothes, jeans | Ministry of Information Culture and Tourism, self-decision |
| Attending marriage ceremonies | All | Sinh and fashionable-clothes | Lao silk shirt and trousers, suit, jeans | Cultural and social-practices, Media, Self-decision |
| | Bride/Groom | Sinh, or wedding dress in Western style | Lao silk and Pa-Bieng, wedding suit in Western style | Self-decision, media, family, and cultural and social practices |
| Working in paid employment | Government officer | Sinh | Trousers, shirt or silk or cotton shirt, black slacks and white shirt, black trousers and shirt uniform | Governmental departments |
| | Employee | Sinh or fashionable clothes | Trousers, black slacks, jeans, shirts, suits, fashionable clothes | Company, media, self-decision |
| | Employee at International company | Fashionable clothes | Trousers, jeans, t-shirt, shirt, fashionable clothes | Company, media, self-decision |
| | Vendor | Fashionable clothes, Sinh | Trousers, jeans, shirt, t-shirt | Media, self-decision |
| | Banker | Sinh and a uniform polo shirt or Fashionable blouse | Black trousers, shirt or silk shirt, polo shirt | Company, self-decision |
| | Business-owner | Fashionable clothes | Fashionable clothes | Self-decision and media |
| | Actor, Actress, Singer | Fashionable clothes (daily life) and on-screen sinh | Fashionable clothes | Self-decision and media |
| Agriculturalists | Fashionable clothes | Fashionable clothes | Self-decision and media | |

Table 5.2: Clothes worn in daily life and on special occasions by Lao women and men in Vientiane city, Laos

This table confirms that men's attire is westernised without incurring cultural policy concerns in Laos. This is not necessarily the same for the traditional female sarong, however, a fact which constitutes a difference in gender roles in Lao society. Women at any age, and across all economic-statuses and occupations, are encouraged to conform to Lao culture and to resist westernisation of culture by wearing the Lao sinh. Wearing the sarong does seem to have an important role to play outside the family: it serves to protect the nation's image and to secure the national identity. Women are protectors of the national costume who have to uphold the national dress. In this sense, women wearing the Lao sinh are understood in terms of developing an understanding of the self as a citizen who supports Lao cultural policy and the sinh. This is commented on by two 32-year olds, a teacher and a businesswoman from Vientiane:

Every Lao woman should wear a sinh. For all official business, wearing trousers is prohibited for women, and they are only allowed to wear them on holidays. Laotians accept that they need to wear a sinh. It is a prerequisite when going to a temple or any religion ceremony. This differs greatly between men and women, as Lao men can wear normal and trendy clothes. (Took, 32, teacher, Vientiane)

When Lao women go to department stores or eat out they dress in extremely fashionable clothes. I think they see them in Thai soap operas and they try to mix and match them with their styles. Focusing only on fashion is a discomforting habit to my way of thinking: we are Asian people, and we should keep on dressing conservatively. (Ple, 32, businesswoman, Vientiane)

The contradiction regarding people's freedom to choose their appearance in public is still a controversial issue in Laos. Young Lao women who daily watch Thai soap operas desire to wear the fashionable clothes that they see on their favourite actresses rather than their traditional sinh. However, this is not always possible because of the government's concerns that non-Lao media, including Thai television, pose a threat to Lao society and culture. The Lao government prefers to maintain traditional dress and Lao female identity by demanding all women wear a sinh for any official events and festivals which represent the nation. In addition, female government workers are also required to wear sinh as a specific uniform to work. Interestingly, the government strictly controls clothing that they deem 'offensive', such as the fashionable clothes imported from neighbouring countries in Lao New Year. A Lao politician articulates his attitude towards the effect of non-Lao media on Lao culture:

The media dramatically affects culture. Lao women choose not to wear sinh (Sarong) but instead increasingly follow Western-style clothes, for example wearing them for New Year celebrations. We

have just banned the blouse with painted-large breasts; they look like real breasts when you see them at a distance; it really looks like a naked body. As soon as it came to Laos, I asked to ban it. This is a big problem which affects our cultural and national security (Sipheng Vongpanya, Director General, Department of Mass Culture in Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, interview).

The Department of Culture strictly control women's appearance. The above quote refers to a dress painted with a bikini girl in a caricature style, which became popular among Thai and Lao teenagers at New Year festivals (SongKarn). When this dress went on sale in Laos, it was immediately banned by the government in order to protect national and cultural sensitivity. Regarding Sipheng Vongpanya's attitudes on the influence of non-Lao media and Western style clothes, he also reiterates that 'the more we (Laotians) accept fragile cultures, the more damage our nation suffers'. Therefore, national cultural politics impose clothing restrictions on the (female) population in daily life.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter, focusing on Thai television soap opera consumption, explores Lao women's transnational television consumption and discusses in detail two thematic outcomes of the research: the acquisition of brand names, and fashion consumption. These themes provide rich insights into the lives of Lao women regarding their encounter with Western conceptions such as materialism and consumerism, which are the driving forces behind globalisation in contemporary Laos. The conceptual tools I used were informed by Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding-decoding media texts model and the concept of uses and gratifications (U&G) introduced by Katz, Blumer and Gurevitch (1974). Thai television soap operas are currently very popular in Laos but they are not the only programmes that broaden Laotians' views: news, music, and films are also influential. In this case, the Lao government realises the role and the influence of Thai television, in particular soap operas, on Lao citizens as an audience in relation to cultural identity, and has consequently attempted to minimise the impact of Western values entering the nation through non-Lao media, Thai TV soap operas.

Thai soap operas and consumerism is the first key theme to emerge from this study, in which Lao women struggle to fulfil their aspirations and meet their goals of autonomy, agency and empowerment in an increasingly neo-liberalised cultural arena (Gill, 2007, 2016; McRobbie, 2008, 2009). In the first group, upper-class women in Vientiane City were characterised by conspicuous consumption, which reflects their financial capabilities and their sense of

achievement in living a high-class identity. The second group, middle-class women as consumers, wealth and social seekers, aspires to the consumption of luxurious items to enhance their social status. They mix and match genuine and counterfeit products. They see luxury as an expression of a desire to overcome the harshness of a complex real existence. The third group, lower-class young women with limited choices in education, finances and career advancement, are not able to purchase Western brand names, but they aspire to, and plan for, the opportunity to have this ability someday. However, a small group of working-class elderly women in Houayxay reject the media portrayal of a life of luxury. They ignore ideals of consumerism and pay attention more to what they see as inner peace and spirituality, and have comparatively low expectations in terms of enhancing their lives materially.

Thai soap operas and the consumption of fashion is the second theme of my study. In a modernising Laos, the relationship between what Lao people wear in their daily lives and what is laid out as acceptable by the authorities for the preservation of national and cultural identity presents a very real challenge for women. Despite a desire to emulate the fashionable western clothing seen in Thai soap operas, the *sinh* is deemed suitable for the very strict dress codes of academic and governmental institutions. Hence we see a kind of cultural identity is hybrid in clothing. The upper-class and middle-class participants in Vientiane conform to the cultural policy of *sinh* wearing on certain occasions, and at the same time they pursue a lifestyle replete with fashionable styles and fashions in their daily lives. In addition, these participants retain a sense of nationhood and local tradition because they also wear a *sinh* for attending religious and marriage ceremonies. On the other hand, the conventional tradition of wearing a *sinh* is less observable among the lower-income teenagers in Bolikhamsai in both their daily lives and at religious festivals. They are encouraged and inspired by the fashionable clothes worn by Thai actresses. Young rural women have subverted the state control and unlocked their limited choices (lack of education, careers and opportunities) through wearing fashionable clothes.

The next chapter will discuss women's emerging desires for a change in attitudes towards agency in relation to processes of individualisation, identity, and consumer-oriented lifestyles in relation to personal and family life. Chapter 6 will also discuss family life and the participants' changing notions of intimate relations in contemporary Laos, aspects of life which have also been greatly influenced by the romantic storylines in Thai soap operas.

Chapter 6. The Influence of Soap Storylines on Women's Changing Attitudes towards Agency, Identity and Lifestyle

6.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses Thai soap storylines about female characters who tackle issues of love, personal and family lives and women's growing personal autonomy in Lao society, drawing on the concept of 'individualisation' and 'detraditionalisation' developed by Anthony Giddens and other social theorists. As Beck (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002) state, the degree of individual choice and agency and liberated life is challenging the traditional values associated with gender roles, duties, status and personal relationships. This chapter focuses on women's attitudes towards modern relationships and morality that relate to their consumption of the love storylines in Thai soap operas. Changes in family structures, romantic relationships, premarital sex, cohabitation, and teenage pregnancy in contemporary Lao society – induced by modernisation, individualism, and social transformations that come with globalisation – provoke state anxieties and government reactions which seek to promote and preserve national cultures and traditions.

The growing independence and desire for autonomy of women is set against traditional understandings of femininity in contemporary Laos. As women can act as catalysts for cultural change, they are regarded as caretakers who maintain traditional cultural mores. This role is supported by state policy. The Thai soap operas watched by the young participants in this study (aged between 18 and 35) do not uphold stereotypical gender conventions that regard women as obedient, submissive and dependent. Among the (53) Lao women interviewed, two thirds of the younger group of participants (14 women aged between 18 and 30 years old) who have high levels of education, financial independence and good careers advocate looser family ties, such as living without parental authority and resisting pressure from various relatives to live under the same roof. They admire the confident female characters in Thai soaps, who enjoy a degree of autonomy in terms of career and personal relationships. I argue that these lifestyle changes are conditioned by the requirements of a society in which consumer-capitalism is becomingly increasingly prevalent and which, in the sphere of relationships, is engendering a type of 'equalising' relationships (Giddens, 1992). These changes in women's values are characterised by individualisation and detraditionalisation (Giddens, 1992).

There are conflicting views of young women and elder women from all socioeconomic backgrounds in Vientiane about the moral obligations in modern relationships. Being young and cohabiting still carries a social stigma. My elderly and middle-aged Lao participants disapprove of this behaviour because they are influenced by the traditional understandings about what makes a virtuous woman. They maintain the traditional values of femininity in Laos. This means that Lao norms associated with marriage and traditional femininity are not easily maintained by a young woman who cohabits with a partner. On the other hand, the majority of Lao participants in my study say their views have broadened on other issues of sexuality, notably how they perceive the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender characters in Thai soap operas. The very small number of lesbian (2) and transgender (1) participants decry the gendered relations of power in Laos, where same-sex relationships are not fully recognised. Under such socio-political conditions, it should be stated that they are brave enough to express their sexual identities and try to gain the acceptance of their families.

The chapter contains two sections to illustrate the significant wider social changes associated with a shift from a collectivist culture to one where individualist values have become more prevalent. The first section, 'Changing families in Laos: traditional duties and modern practices', describes how Lao participants' lifestyles today and the values of traditional family structures are being reshaped by the ethos of individualism. The second section, 'Morality and sexuality in intimate relationships', describes how the individualised participants' attitudes towards love and relationships in their lives can be understood within the context of traditional notions of feminine virtue and morality. The discussion in both sections draws on the focus group data and a section of the TV diaries and shows the ways in which soap storylines portray different ways of living and being which are increasingly attractive to audiences who seek to appropriate such lifestyles for themselves.

6.2 Changing families in Laos: traditional duties and modern practices

The worldview of Lao proverbs has been continually cultivated in Lao family life and schools in order to maintain traditional family values. A Lao proverb, “ແກ້ວບໍ່ຜັດ ສາມປີເປັນແຮ່ ພີ່ນ້ອງບໍ່ແວ່ ສາມປີເປັນເພິ່ນ” (Kanya, 2010, p.2) states that ‘a valuable glass which is not cleaned for three years will become a mineral, and siblings who don’t see each other for three years will turn into strangers.’ It is a matter of some concern that while in the past Laotians regularly visited and paid attention to their family members, this is less the case today. This can be understood as an

erosion or modification of the collectivism which has traditionally been a hallmark of Lao family relationships.

Kongsirirat (2005) also claims that in family bonds in Laos, “Love, a tight community and helpfulness in the Lao family are distinguishing features of the identity of Lao people” (p. 153). More generally, they are an important aspect of Eastern society. Another Lao proverb, ‘ສຸກເພາະ ມີເຂົ້າກິນ ມີດິນຢູ່ ມີຄູ່ນອນນ່າ ມີເງິນຄ່າເຕັມຖົງ ມີເຮືອນໃຫຍ່ ມຸງແປ້ນກະດານ ມີລູກຫຼານມານັ່ງເຜົ່າ’ (Veeravong, 2000, p.6) reflects the traditional Lao belief that a genuinely happy family is one which has enough food and essentials, land for a rice paddy, loyal spouses, a full bag of gold and a small wooden house, and is surrounded by their kin.

In reality, family remains at the centre of Southeast Asian society, which focusses on care of the elderly (Morrow, 1989; Hatmaji and Wiyono, 2008). According to a proclamation of the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism (2014), Lao PDR, in the publication ‘Cultural Family’ (obtained from Sipheng Vongpanya, Director General, Department of Mass Culture), the role of the family is a part of national policy that every Lao family should strive to attain:

- 1) Personal possessions with accommodation, jobs, and ability to earn a living;
- 2) Very good relationships with traditions and customs, harmony, equality, and respectability without feudalism;
- 3) An understanding of how to nurture children to be good people, supporting children’s education which teaches gratitude to parents;
- 4) The status of an anti-drug family, not believing in superstitious nonsense, and maintaining traditions and culture;
- 5) Traditional ideas of a harmonious and helpful family.

(Official leaflet, Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, 2014).

However, the findings from my study confirm that the appeal to my young educated participants in Vientiane to obey such state policies is not hugely successful. These women seem to be turning their backs on marriage because they are wary of subsuming their new found liberation to pursue a career and be independent under the need to care for a husband and family. In response to the question ‘Which examples of behaviour do you think are positive and you would

like to follow yourself?, the main answers reflect on a smart and strong heroine character type depicted in Thai soaps who rejects men who have mistresses. The participants who are financially independent and self-reliant do not need to tolerate an adulterous husband. This, I argue, is because social and economic changes in Laos, based on the consumerism and individualism associated with globalisation and cosmopolitan lifestyles, together with Lao women's consumption of Thai soap operas in everyday life, are reshaping my participants' romantic and intimate relationships in a way that undermines traditional Lao customs. Nearly 60 per cent of young women in my study from the age of 18 to 25 are rejecting the traditional views in favour of freedom and autonomy to make their own decisions about such matters, while 70 per cent of women aged over 40 still adhere to those values, which accord with the traditional characteristics of a virtuous, patient, and hard-working woman.

Notwithstanding the significance of 'Cultural Family' policies and Lao proverbs, the idea of the traditional Lao family as living in domestic harmony as an extended family has become less relevant in this globalised world. A full 60 per cent of the Lao participants no longer live with their family and relatives, as typically happened in the past¹⁸. More than half originally living in rural areas who are students or in their first jobs have moved to Vientiane and want to work in metropolitan areas in Thailand so as to increase the feeling of well-being, their wealth and independence.

More than half of the participants (28) in the focus group discussions explain the reason for moving away from the parental home is to fulfil aspirations towards more democratic intimate relationships as a consequence of an increased emphasis on individualisation. At the start of the 21st century, the traditional image of the typical Lao family, therefore, has virtually disappeared in Vientiane, and is even receding greatly from some rural areas. Lao women can now enter a stronger job market in the cities and hope for more opportunities for paid employment (Bouté and Pholsena, 2017). In addition, female characters are often portrayed as having more authority than men in Thai soap operas, in particular holding a higher position in employment, and this was apparent from the discussions conducted with the participants. For example, Yusa, the chief of special detachment in the Thai soap opera *Zeal 5 Kon Gla Tah Atam* (January 2012-October 2015), reinforces the participants' aspirations to be more intelligent and independent and to enjoy a sense of empowerment and personal achievement within an equal relationship.

¹⁸ Average size of household in Laos: 6 persons in 2000 and 5.6 person in 2005. Lao reproductive health survey 2005. National Statistics Centre (NSC) Luang prabang Road, Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR

My study shows that 70 per cent of the middle-aged participants, living in both urban and rural areas, had ambivalent attitudes towards their traditional duties as caretakers. That is, family ties are still strong but the ways in which families live are now different: they tend to live in smaller units (51 per cent). The participants need to take care of parents, parent children, do housework and their own job; meanwhile, they desire to be independent from their families. In this sense, the pattern of patriarchal authority in the capital is still a powerful force in which married participants have various roles in the family – wife, mother, and daughter or daughter-in-law – and devote their lives to serving their families. As a 46-year-old teacher from Vientiane states:

Traditionally, a wife should take good care of her husband and mother-in-law. But in some Thai dramas Nang Ake [the leading female protagonist] argues all the time with her husband and often does not get along with her mother-in-law, and behaves in a silly way. This is also a normal thing in our real life. I totally understand her feelings and behaviours. My husband is such a social butterfly and my mother-in-law makes unreasonable demands. It is unfair to be patient when staying with them. (Lar, 46, teacher, Vientiane)

The young middle-class participants in my study who are single have professional careers prefer living in a nuclear family but still maintain the roles of taking care of their wider family. The nuclear family, with members who have more modern, individualised values, is becoming more prevalent in Vientiane. The fictional, privatised (or atomised) nuclear family in Thai soap operas is seen as a sign of modernity, a means to ending poverty, and an indication of increased well-being, but at the same time as family-centred and focussed on the care of the elderly. The representation of the family structure and associated storylines impact on the participants' attitudes because of the cultural proximity between Lao and Thai. My participants therefore regard the nuclear family as both a wealthy and warm-hearted arena, and enjoying certain privileges, such as personal luxuries, and a number of freedoms in life. This means the participants still invest more in the family unit than in their autonomy. As a 22-year-old accountant from Vientiane city states:

Louk Mai Lark Sri: this drama is about a modern and rich family; there are only four persons – Dad, Mom and [two] daughters. The family does not love their children equally: the mother's husband has died, and her new partner brings his daughter to live with them. They love the father's daughter more than the mother's; however, she is spoiled and finally disappoints her parents in contrast with the other daughter who is treated less well and does not receive as much attention from the parents but turns out to be

a helpful and kind person. I am very impressed with this storyline because the family are faced with difficulties, but there is one brave person who never gives up. Nang Ake [a leading actress] is a strong and independent woman who resolves the family's crisis with an ambitious plan and positive energy; her family status improves and they become wealthy. Actually, her life is a mess, but she sorted it out. (Nuke, 22, accountant, Vientiane)

However, eight young adult middle-class participants in my study aspire to live in a nuclear family in response to a large number of household bills that trigger a loosening of family ties. Since the participants carry burden domestic duties and paying bills for members of family who do not work. They explain that living in an extended family involves a lack of private space in the home and a number of familial conflicts linked to economic problems. In a sense, these younger people's desires for privacy and freedom in urban Laos are a manifestation of detraditionalisation. The pattern of family living has changed and family support has faded in many rural areas of Laos as well. Traditional close family ties and values, therefore, are being transformed across the country in the context of the growth of new values. As Ferguson *et al.* (2017) state, media have brought about sociocultural adaption among adolescents. In my study, a higher degree of acculturation through consumption of Thai TV soaps results in lower family cohesion for young adult participants in Laos.

The middle-class female Lao viewers from urban and rural areas read or understand Thai soap opera portrayals of various family structures and family bonds as framed by materialistic and consumer-oriented lifestyles and wealth-power dynamics, indicative of the process of individualisation. In their interpretations of soap texts, the participants find attractive images of nuclear and rich families owing to their economic pressures, at the same time disregarding extended families living in three generations, which are often portrayed in Thai soaps as entailing numerous troublesome family relations. This reflects the gradual erosion of the desire to choose to live in a 'traditional cultural family' in contemporary Laos. The participants articulate this in the following ways:

I prefer a rich, small family. Living with many people usually leads to conflicts and financial problems. I think rich families always do well; they have enough money to make their personal lives comfortable. The super-rich families in Thai dramas never ever put a foot wrong. I like that kind of family. I don't want to be involved with close and distant relatives. (Keaw, 25, employee, Houayxay)

I watch the Thai soap opera Heng Heng Heng. I think that a large family and kin always has varied opinions and arguments with each other and no private space, so I choose to live in a small family because it is simple. Hence, today, families do not need to be large. It [life] must be affordable for a small member of family. (Muon, 32, merchant, Vientiane)

A consequence of the participants' engagement with Thai soaps in their everyday lives is an emotional involvement with characters whose behaviour often counters Lao social norms and traditional family life. Six participants who are housewives in rural areas interpreted the soap opera meanings in such a way that they saw themselves as the opposite of the leading actress's persona. The six participants position themselves as rebellious, aggressive and cunning in order to combat and mitigate their frustration and resentment in the real world. The women represented in Thai soaps are viewed as active, strong, and independent women, replacing the stereotype of traditional (passive) femininity in the participants' attitudes. As one participant explains:

I like Thai soap operas because I want to be like Nang Rai [the female anti-heroine]. She satisfies all my emotions, but Nang Ake [the leading female protagonist] looks too weak and naive. If I could be Nang Ake, I would be strong and never change. For example, Kwan Usamanee [a Thai actress] in the Thai soap opera Mai Sin Rai Fai Sawad got her revenge on her lover and his family. She's a powerhouse of a modern woman. (Tong-Mun, 38, vendor, Houayxay)

Their response to the Thai soaps indicate that the programmes act as tools to distract them from the drudgery of housework and the pressures of patriarchal family relationships. Previous studies of women and soap-viewing (eg. Fisk, 1987; Liebes and Katz; 1993; Banaji, 2011) corroborate my finding in relation to women audiences' liberal views towards gender roles. In a sense, this also reflects their existing family conflicts and the hierarchical structure of Lao society, with the participants who are wives and mothers faced with negotiating their own gender relations through their interpretations of the main female and male protagonists' relationships in the soaps. The men portrayed in Thai soaps fulfil the participants wish to attain equality in their relationships. Three TV diarists in my study are very satisfied with the standard of desired masculinity portrayed in Thai soaps: the charming young man who is a kind and perfect gentleman. As a 34-year-old employee in Vientiane writes in her diary:

Tonight, I like the scenes when it comes to clearing away the dishes, Pra-Ake (Thai leading actor) is respectful, polite, handsome and particularly helpful. He also drove Nang-Ake (Thai leading actress) to the supermarket and he was worried about upsetting her. He actually felt sorry for it and then created hilarious situations to make her smile. He (Pra-Ake) is interesting and worth living with. (Jane, 34, employee, Vientiane)

My data indicate that there is a clear split between urban and rural women. A long tradition of gratitude to men (Pachavong, 2007) and respect for the strengths of masculinity are rooted in Lao culture, resulting in the deniable freedom and individual agency for women (Giddens, 1992, 1998). Young women in rural areas are less well educated and therefore have fewer choices, and even though they may watch the same soaps and have the same aspirations, their horizons are nonetheless more limited. A small group of teenage participants from Bolikhamsai explain that they show respect to their parents not only by obeying and taking care of them, but also by leaving school to work for a living. This gives brothers a chance to go to school. Expressing gratitude is regarded as an honour of femininity and a virtue in Lao society, which women need to complete their family's happiness.

Poverty and gender inequality in education¹⁹ are key challenges for the participants' bids for personal autonomy in rural Laos, where the traditional patriarchal family upholds a long-held preference for a son. According to a 2012 survey by the Department of Statistics, the Ministry of Planning and UNICEF discuss the tradition of son preference in Lao society. It found that, among the poorest households, girls attended school in lower numbers than boys. Further to this, the primary school completion rate among boys (100 per cent) was higher than that of girls (88 per cent). A full nineteen per cent of female primary children were also out of school²⁰. In my study, young, less-educated participants from Bolikhamsai are extremely supportive of family relationships. The economic and familial pressures placed on their study opportunities exemplify the participants' limited choices to live a more liberated life. They are unable to make choices in their personal lives because of a lack of education. Their occupations are mainly orientated around manual labour. As a 22-year-old dancer and a 23-year-old employee explain:

¹⁹ Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) noted there are still a number of challenges that girls and women in Laos are facing, including lack of education and job opportunities in Laos, and the Ministry of Education and Sports reported the enrolment rates in secondary and higher education are still low in rural areas (The Report 2017 Round Table Implementation Meeting on 22nd - 23rd November 2017, Champasak Province, Lao PDR).

²⁰ Measures of children out of school. Data Centre, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics (2008). Available from:
<http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/tableView.aspx?ReportId=184>

It is necessary to take care of your family. Parents are the persons who give us life, and I repay their kindness when I have the opportunity. I have to earn money and work hard away from home for my family, and I miss them. I decided to give up soon after starting school. My brother should study. Honestly, I want to be a beautiful air hostess like Nang-Ake [a leading female protagonist] in the Thai soap opera, *Song Kram Nang Fah*, but I didn't receive much formal schooling. (New, 23, dancer, Bolikhamsai)

I would be a teacher, but I gave up my dream due to my family's economic problems. Family comes first. (Gift, 22, employee, Bolikhamsai)

On the other hand, domestic harmony and traditional family values are still reinforced by the consumption of Thai soap opera's TV plots around family life (eg. Thippayachan, 2010) when considered in isolation from other popular cultural influences. Lao traditional family life is described as a tight community with extended kin. My study found that 30 per cent of working-class and less-educated participants in Bolikhamsai agreed and admired a leading actress who portrays a good daughter who takes care of her parents. The consumption of some Thai soap opera storylines about family bonds is therefore endorsing the traditional values of harmonious family life in Laos. They still revere their parents and traditional values. As one 23-year old from Bolikhamsai states:

I have to work here, which is far away from my home, so it is impossible for us to live together. I left school to work for my parents and let my older and younger brothers study. Whenever I visit home, I can spend time with them: having dinner together, helping them to do housework and washing the clothes. I think Thai soap operas teach us to do good things for our parents, taking care of them and giving them money. I want to emulate this goodness and the actress's success. It is a really good point of Thai soap operas. (Fon, 23, dancer, Bolikhamsai)

The participants living in Vientiane who watch the same programmes attempt to negotiate with these storylines and the portrayal of protagonists that follow traditional values. Young upper-class and middle-class women with university degrees in my study renegotiate their careers and family commitments. They choose to achieve their ambitions in life to be strong-willed, determined, and self-enriched women. This signifies that education and a job are contributing factors and beneficial to these women. The traditional values of being an obedient and hard-working woman have shifted into values that prioritise being a young independent woman who believes in her ability to successfully combine family life and a career. In this sense, Giddens'

(1992) thesis that one aspect of detraditionalisation is to lead women to increased individualisation is not fully reflected in contemporary Lao cultural conditions. My study found that there were considerable differences between individuals in my sample, with the notion of hybridity, i.e. of wanting the best of both cultures and not seeing this as problematic. Rather, my study indicates that ‘female individualisation’ as a key term to achieve gender equality (McRobbie, 2009) can be seen more as the maintenance of traditional equilibrium in Vientiane. As one 26-year-old accountant states:

I like the leading female protagonist to be strong but not hard, and to never forget their own duties. You should spend some time on yourself. Every woman indeed has their own strength, more perseverance than men do. We are gentle yet relentless. As we see in soaps and reality, it is not wrong for a woman these days to be both the leader and the follower in her family at the same time. After all, when you’re with someone you love, there must be some balance. But what can we do to keep that balance under control? If you have a supporting role in your family, you must make sure that you have the power to support and look after everyone. But you need to be able to stand on your own one day. You have to get better jobs and earn more money. (Nuke, 26, accountant, Vientiane)

Moreover, the harmonious Lao family and warm-hearted relations are retransmitted in era of digitalisation. Social media is playing an important role in the convergence of having individual agency and being a good daughter in terms of young Lao participants’ media use and everyday routines. A quarter of the young participants in Vientiane and the countryside who possess smartphones routinely make use of social media on a daily basis: they not only watch Thai media, especially soap operas, but also contact their family and friends. Since the participants do not live in the same house with parents and relatives, connectedness through social media is giving them an enhanced opportunity to share in family life while at the same time not necessarily living within a traditional family structure. They engage in conversations via new communication methods on mobile phones with family and friends, texting interactively, posting photos and sending stickers. Smart phones and mobile applications allow them to breathe life into what might otherwise become moribund familial bonds and friendships. These results are consistent with the previous studies of young people and their social media use for interactions with family and friends (e.g. Bolton *et al.*, 2013; Whiting and Williams, 2013; Chan, 2015).

The Round Table Implementation Meeting (RTIM) Report 2017, prepared by the Ministry of Planning and Investment in Laos, notes that family planning, social issues and problems are key policy areas which need extra attention. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) also uses a social media campaign on adolescent Lao girls as an initiative for sustainable development (RTIM, 2017). We can surmise that Lao families are becoming geographically fragmented as a result of social mobility, globalisation and deep changes in young women's lifestyles, but traditional values of the family are still sustained, partly through use of social media. For example, young participants shape their contemporary and individualised lives and bridge family ties without the constraints of tradition and custom. In this event, young Lao audiences provide an idea of networked friendship with the family through the usage of mobile technology within the context of globalisation. The use of social media is seen as a way of decreasing the impact of geographical distance and of increasing the scale and intensity of family networks (Bengston, 2001; Kennedy *et al.*, 2008; Hertlein, 2012). As a 23-year-old singer and a 26-year-old master student articulate:

Modern technology is useful for getting family members to meet and share activities together; for example, I go to watch a movie and travel with my family on holiday. I personally admire a happy and warm family like my own. I pursued my dream and finally achieved my ambition to be a fashion model and singer. Thus we don't see one another or stay together every day, but we always contact one another via social media like LINE and Facebook. (Barbie Piyamarth, 23, singer and model, Vientiane)

Sometimes you need to take time out of your busy lives just to be together with family in this globalising world. I usually call and send messages and cartoon stickers to them. It's a convenient way to contact with my mum, who is working in Switzerland while I am studying in Thailand. We are in close touch through social media. (Ting, 26, Masters Student, Houayxay)

In summary, these significant changes in Lao society are perceived to be leading towards an increase in nuclear families. According to the 4th population and housing census (PHC) 2015 report, 17 per cent live in households with three members and 31 per cent with only two members. Lao women (54 per cent) are also more likely to live by themselves today (PHC, 2015). The concept of the traditional Lao family, in terms of a tight community, is being transformed, with the loosening of family ties, but family bonds are still sustained by many young and middle-aged participants remaining keenly aware of their duties. The growth of

Lao's socioeconomic development²¹ has coincided with the rise in popularity of Thai soap operas, imbued as they are with consumer-capitalist ideology and thereby acting as a catalyst for the process of individualisation (Giddens, 1992, 1998). The fictional group of people in Thai soap operas mostly exhibit luxurious lifestyles, education, and wealth, are urban, and have career advancements and an apparently 'liberated' life.

A desire for and pursuit of personal wealth is an increasingly strong personal motivating factor which is behind changing family structures from a traditional extended family to a modern nuclear family. Sixty per cent of the participants feel money has become more central to their lives. A small family unit such as a modern nuclear family is seen as a means to achieving more financial independence, which in turn affords them the freedom to shape their own lives. In addition, gratitude towards one's family is a recurring theme in Thai soap opera storylines, acting as a linkage between modern and traditional perceptions of the traditional Lao family. The representation of virtuous women in Thai soaps reinforces some young participants from countryside to follow the traditional values of being a grateful and servile woman. Therefore, gratitude is a substitute for extended family relations.

In addition to the changes in urban centres, gender roles and gender inequality have undergone important transformations in rural areas too. As a result of the pressures of financial problems and the traditional preference for sons, a group of young, less educated women in rural areas with traditional values of gratitude and servitude help their families to alleviate poverty by leaving school so as to provide more educational opportunities to their brothers, and then work in manual labour to earn money to take care of their parents. They still cling to the pre-industrial concept of the extended family in which parents and relatives support one another as a result of the traditional values and customs of their daughters expressing gratitude for being born. The next section describes the personal relationship choices made by women in the pursuit of romantic fulfilment that are generating anxiety within the Lao government. I also address how morality in intimate relations is affected by Lao women's consumption of Thai trans-border TV soap operas.

²¹ Increased electricity consumption in remote areas (97.25%), achieved enrolment rate for upper-secondary education (41.9%), and 115,174 households categorised as developed, representing 94.7% of the total number of households (Round Table Implementation Meeting Report in Laos, 2017)

6.3 Changing morality and sexuality in intimate relationships

As noted in the previous section, the nuclear family unit (48 per cent of my participants) has become more acceptable and popular in Lao society, particularly in Vientiane, thus following the model of Western family units. At the same time, alongside the gradual erosion of the extended family in favour of the modern nuclear unit, there has been a significant rise in the social stigma of expressions of young women sexuality among Lao family members. As the 4th population and housing census (PHC) 2015 report, young couples in both urban and rural areas of Laos increasingly prefer cohabitation to marriage (12.5 per cent). Twenty-five per cent of women had their first pregnancy between the ages of 15 and 19 (PHC, 2015). In 2008, a young women's sexual behaviour study of 15-24 year-old females in Vientiane city surveyed by the Department of Health of Vientiane Capital Burnet Institute and United Nations Population Fund showed unmarried respondents (36.6 per cent) reported having had more than one sexual partner²² at one time, which runs counter to the traditional Lao convention (for women) of monogamy.

In my study, this desire for a flexible relationship creates complex conditions within romantic relationships, such as the possibility for cohabitation (40 per cent of the young participants) and same-sex intimacies (less than 2 per cent) among the young participants in both the capital and the countryside. Comparably, the 2005 Lao Productive Health Survey (LRHS)²² reported 75.2 per cent of adolescents and young Lao women as single, whereas the Laos Country Review (2016) showed 27 per cent of never married women aged 15 -19 years. This fluctuating level of sexual intimacy in more fluid, transient relationships or more egalitarian relationships is highlighted by divorce rates (3.9 per cent) (LRHS, 2005), in contrast to the picture painted by Deputy Minister Bouangeun Xaphouvong, who states that:

Lao culture has been well preserved, even though Laotians have adopted a steady stream of external cultural processes into their daily lives. We select only good cultural practices and adapt them to our national ways. In the Lao family, everyone lives together in perfect harmony. (Interview on 14 May, 2015 at Ministry of Information Culture and Tourism, Vientiane)

The minister's opinion, which should be taken as a piece of political propaganda, indicates a governmental concern for the decline of the traditional cultural family in contemporary Laos.

²² Lao Reproductive Health Survey 2005. Committee for Planning and Investment, National Statistics Centre. Supported by the United Nations Population Fund, 2007.

The state is trying to prevent what they deem unacceptable behaviour under the influence of non-Lao cultural norms. His perception of this cultural issue comes from the position as a policy-maker and a member of the Lao government with responsibility for maintaining national and cultural security. In my study, the participants reflected a degree of disapproval with the government's policies. The evidence garnered from interviews shows that they tend to emphasise their desire for individual choice and motivation, rather than pursue the government's idealised perception of tradition and local customs.

6.3.1 *Participants' views about cohabitation*

According to a study of young women's sexual behaviour in Vientiane (2008), 81.3 per cent of women aged 15-24 reported having had sex with a boyfriend, reflecting the fact that increased cohabitation has played a role. The trend of young cohabitating couples is a phenomenon disapproved of by the government, and one which is explained by individualisation (Giddens, 1992, 1998), in which Western ideas of individual agency within more democratic intimate relationships have prompted the mutation of traditional customs and social norms in favour of the concept of freedom of choice between couples.

In my study, the wider socio-cultural changes in both urban and rural areas, accompanied by economic growth and improving standards of living (Bouté and Pholsena, 2017), underpin young Lao female viewers' struggles to achieve more choice in romantic relationships. As Morrison (2014) posits, "The emergence of cohabitation [is] an alternative to the traditional form of the family" (p. 381). A full 55 per cent of the participants who are young workers and students in Vientiane believe they have reproductive freedom, democracy and a wider array of realisable choices. They consider themselves as self-interested agencies with a personal life full of choices. As a 26-year-old salesclerk and a 24-year-old student in Vientiane describe their views on intimate relationships:

Couples in some Thais series are no longer always seen as taking out a lifetime commitment; marriage may not be a key issue in their lives. I agree because we are young and we have no commitments, we can do whatever we want. It is our right as long as it is legal. (Von, 26, salesclerk at jewellery shop, Vientiane)

There are try-outs for young couples in society with absolutely no commitment to have a long relationship and a happy marriage! It is a normal lifestyle for teenagers (Ple, 24, student, Vientiane)

The middle-class and working-class young female participants in Vientiane have been affected by Lao society in terms of the decline of traditional Lao family values, based on moral obligations and social norms. This was previously reflected in both Western and non-Western societies. For example, TV dating programmes can influence young Chinese women to reject traditional relationship ethics and view premarital sex, cohabitation and extramarital affairs in a less negative light (Chen, 2015; Yang, 2017). Similarly, PHC data (2015) shows quite a high rate of stay together/in union without marriage (12.5 per cent) in urban and rural households of Laos. In my study, a number of participants (27 per cent) believe that cohabitation and premarital sex in contemporary intimate relationships are normal and that marriage and permanent relationships can lead to unhappiness and problems, such as a marriage ending in divorce. At first, a 23-year-old product promoter from Vientiane denies cohabiting with partner, but later she admits to it:

Cohabiting teenage couples is a normal situation in Thailand that we can see in news and soaps, yet it is difficult to accept this issue in my society. It is against culture and the custom for women... To tell the truth, we have many young couples living together here in an apartment, especially students and adolescents. I've also decided in favour of the comfortable option to make sure that I don't mind his every single habit. There is no telling what in the future will happen to me. Arguably, I think it works well for me since many married couples end their relationships with divorces in present time. (Nan, 23, product promoter, Vientiane)

My study shows that sixty per cent of young, middle-class participants aged 26 to 35 years old with careers have freedom of thought on their relationships. They regard cohabitation as part of a normal, liberated life. They cohabit with their partners without it necessarily leading to marriage, a situation that is contingent on both parties remaining committed – not permanently but until they both decide to part company. In this event, they believe that cohabiting before marriage can reduce the chance of divorce or separation. The young Lao women in my study, in particular those living in Vientiane, regard cohabitation as a step towards married life. A 32-year-old teacher explains that:

I think a cohabitation agreement is mainly a method for couples to study each other before having the traditional marriage ceremony. The cohabitation issue is increasingly prevalent in Lao society and often seen in Thai soap operas. For example, Thai stars have relationships for 9-10 years before getting married, but in the Lao tradition if you have been dating for 10 years, then you no longer have a marriage ceremony; you seem to have an

insoluble problem. We have different traditions and norms. Anyway, it is changing: my partner and I have been in a serious relationship for more 10 years, but we don't have any plans to marry at present because of our commitments and a financial issue. (Laddawan, 32, teacher, Vientiane)

On the one hand, young people's views are at odds with the reality of cohabitation. Many Western studies show that couples who cohabit with their partners before marriage have a higher risk of being divorced than those who do not (Kenney, 2004; Sassler, 2004; Lichter and Qian, 2008). In my study, a small group of teenage women (5 per cent of the total sample) who have a good education and live with their parents in Vientiane disagree with the need to cohabit and with other expressions of sexual liberation. They value the stereotype of the virtuous women with all its associated conventional attitudes about monogamy and an overt act of sexual feelings, which are deeply rooted for women in Lao history. This suggests that an awareness of traditional feminine identity, one of the government's cultural policies, is taking root among some Lao teenagers in my study. These young Lao women still pursue the ideal perception of tradition and local customs. As a 19-year-old law student from Vientiane explains:

If you are still young and cannot earn money, you should obey the commands of your parents, who have much more experience and who love us. My mom tells me that if I easily give a man my love when I am still young, I will devalue my self-dignity and reduce my chances of having a good husband. (Prang, 19, student, Vientiane)

Despite the reservations that some of my participants held about such manifestations of personal autonomy in relationships as premarital sex, these new type of flexible and intimate relationship are having an influence on traditional Lao feminine values and morality, generating anxieties at the level of the state, which are then reflected in cultural policies, political discourse and the media.

6.3.2 Participants' views on unmarried women vs divorced women

As we have seen in the previous sections, Lao women's pursuit of a modern lifestyle has been a major factor in the reconstitution of family structures. These changing family structures in turn shape patterns of individual behaviour within the family. The results of a population and

housing census in (2015) showed that a high proportion of women have never married (49.2 per cent) or are divorced/separated (75 per cent), in both urban and rural areas.

My study also shows that twenty per cent of the participants in Vientiane and Houayxay have been successful in their education and career and remain single and unmarried beyond the age of thirty. The participants have not only contributed significantly to the socio-economic development of the country, but also to changing perceptions of women's roles in society by becoming increasingly independent of the hold that traditional understandings of femininity had over them (i.e. as obedient, dependent and passive members of a patriarchal family). The participants find more space to pursue individualisation without the social constraints that had hitherto set parameters on what was deemed socially acceptable and the kinds of behaviours that had met with social disapproval. These developments echo earlier changes which were explored in studies of Western societies (Haimes, 1990; Giddens, 1992; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Budgeon and Roseneil, 2002; Chapman, 2004; Biblarz and Savci, 2010).

The interviews with unmarried, middle-class women in Vientiane and Houayxay indicate that the participants are making considerable efforts to negotiate their roles as women and their enhanced desires for and pursuit of independence and personal freedoms. As a 39-year-old businesswoman and a 28-year-old teacher, both of whom enjoy more choices in their personal lives, explain:

Fragmented or divorced families are a regular phenomenon in our society and in my family; Lakorn [Thai drama] just presents the social issues and social decline. I am an unmarried mother, but I can afford two cars, a house, and to send my children to study at good schools. (Jin, 39, Businesswoman, Vientiane)

I personally think we have a right to make the choice to get away. I personally don't want to have more troubles, so I don't want to get married. People who get divorced do so because they are not happy to live together. There is no reason to have a lot of patience in dealing with a bad husband who is cheating on his wife. (Pad, 28, teacher, Houayxay)

In contrast, the majority (70 per cent) of the working-class participants aged more than 40 years, who only finished primary school and are living in rural areas, express that they usually comport themselves with great dignity towards their husbands to prevent problems that may lead to family troubles and, possibly, divorce. They exhibit a great deal of patience in order to keep their family relationships happy and peaceful, even in circumstances where adultery has

occurred. In this context, the participants maintain the traditional values of femininity in Laos: a quiet, submissive, loyal and dependent wife. This suggests that the poorer, middle-aged women from rural areas in my study still follow the traditional role of wife instead of pursuing a more liberated woman's lifestyle. A 45-year-old employee from Bolikhamsai takes the attitude that:

I think people get a divorce because they do not understand or talk to each other. The most important thing is we have to love each other and consider our long-term relationship. We cannot allow mistresses to break up the family unit; it is like Thai Nang Ake [Thai female protagonist]: she smiles serenely and says nothing to her husband's mistress. Her husband comes back to her in the end. We have to be calm and generous. He finally reconciles with his virtuous wife. (Ban-Yen, 45, employee, Bolikhamsai)

6.3.3 Participants' views about teenage pregnancy and abortion

According to the Young Women's Sexual Behaviour Study of 2008, 22.3 per cent of young Lao women aged 15-24 in Vientiane have had an abortion, with the majority (61.2 per cent) taking medicine to induce the abortion. The Prevention of Unsafe Abortion Guideline prepared by the Ministry of Public Health in Laos also reported that 130 young women died after deliberately terminating a pregnancy in 2013. The prevalence of adolescent and young women's pregnancies and abortion in Laos has decreased slightly in recent years. However, it is both illegal and widely considered immoral to have an abortion in Laos (Laos Review, 2016). In my study, this set of circumstances is evident in a young Lao participant who had previously cohabited with her boyfriend without parental consent, thereby reflecting the trend of individualisation. She makes her own choices about intimate relationships and terminated an unintended pregnancy, which is not something that a woman adhering to traditional would consider.

Reflecting the trend of individualisation, Thai soap operas depict monogamous relationships and premarital sex in a negative light as a way of examining the decline of family life in modern society, often to reinvigorate the traditional values of a virtuous woman (Tantiniranat, 2009). Meanwhile, new representations of social issues revolving around teenage love and intimate relationships in Thai TV series are increasing, many of which are discussed by the viewers in my study.

The few young participants of the study sometimes face complex issues revolving around premarital sex and teenage pregnancies, yet existing ethical norms and religious and moral values allow a successful negotiation of the problem. Only two young women in my study who accepted and experienced an unplanned pregnancy were able to cope with the unwanted experience by managing within the confines of a traditional family. This is because Lao family ties, in terms of family togetherness and a sense of kinship, forgive and support their members who make mistakes in their sexual relations. This suggests that young participants pull through complex situations like teenage pregnancy and abortion with the use of traditional values and ethical norms and ties of family togetherness and kinship. As a 22-year-old student from Vientiane explains about pregnancy and family support:

I like drama storylines about a country girl entering the capital city for schooling and enjoying an extravagant life. She tells lies to her parents to get money out of them; I feel very sorry for her parents. Then, she gets into trouble, becoming pregnant. I actually had the same problem, but refused to abort it. There are too many such incidents in this society. Whenever it happens, we should help those unfortunate people to solve their problem. Most Lao teenagers here in this situation have parents helping to take care of their babies so that they can continue to study. (Roza, 22, student, Vientiane)

However, every female participant who had reached middle age and lives in a low-income household in Houayxay disagrees with cohabitation. These participants regard themselves as traditionalists, approaching relationships from a conventional perspective and believing women should remain virgins until they wed. Thus, cohabiting couples carry a social stigma in rural communities and are viewed as having dishonoured their families. My participants also see the marriage ceremony as a symbol of love and blessings by the family and relatives (Weeks, 2014). As one middle-aged woman put it:

I like the concept of monogamy because our society is a rural community and we don't like promiscuity. I think Lao women are willing to lose a lot of gold rather than lose their husbands. I am! When unmarried couples live together in Laos, neighbours gossip about them incessantly, since it is such a small community and everyone knows one another. (Bua-Sorn, 51, housewife, Houayxay)

Conversely, one young, educated participant from a wealthy family, who did not want to be identified, had different attitudes to premarital sex and teenage pregnancies. She explains that

cohabitation is a modern form of a romantic relationship. Nonetheless, this woman, who is a public figure, stresses the need to behave well and to act as if cohabitation and unplanned pregnancy do not happen in order to maintain a modest public persona, or ‘save face.’ This indicates that the upper-class participant has pretensions to a liberated and modern lifestyle, but behind this claim she actually concurs with the conventional values of a virtuous woman, if only to save face and ‘keep the family peace.’

As we have seen in the previous sections, the traditional cultural concept of Lao family life is being eroded by a geographical fragmentation of families, escalating divorce rates (now at 3.9 per cent), cohabiting couples (12.5 per cent), premarital sex (19.2 per cent)²³, and teenage pregnancies (22.3 per cent). The personal freedom and choice for female respondents also become more apparent when examples of abortion are under discussion. Two participants from working-class families who have experienced premarital pregnancies themselves and know others who have also been in that situation they believe that abortion is a double-edged sword: it can help them move forward in their lives, but it leaves them with a guilty conscience, since Buddhist precepts teach that we should refrain from destroying life.

The reasons why a small number of young participants in my study decided to have a termination are clear: a lack of parenting ability, a fear of parents’ reactions, concern about their studies, social humiliation, and a sense of shame. Nonetheless, morality based on religious beliefs also impacted on their perceptions about abortion, since, as noted, abortion is prohibited in Buddhism, making the termination of a pregnancy a sin (as well as a crime). Two teenage participants’ reasons for having an abortion stem from family problems and the weakening of religious authority in contemporary society, a situation which, as I have argued, is changing to some extent under the influence of values transmitted by transnational media. As a 20-year-old employee explains:

I know that abortion is very dangerous and also an immoral act, but it also helps my life to go on. I broke up with my boyfriend as a result of quite a long separation. I haven’t spoken to anyone [about the abortion]. I am ashamed to admit this mistake. My heart feels heavy. I am guilty of a sin. Good Thai series like *Hormones* have also covered teenage pregnancy and precautions against pregnancy. There are two characters who encounter the same problem. The First is Dao, a young high school student who

²³ The Department of Health of Vientiane Capital (PCCA) in collaboration with the Burnet Institute and UNFP, 2011. Available at <http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/lao/drive/FinalReportYoungWomensSexualBehaviourStudy.pdf>

decided to have an abortion after she had sex without protection and cannot even talk about it with her mom. She feels guilty and shameful. The second character, Sprite's mom, who has a career and enough income, accidentally became pregnant, but she is going through a rough patch at the moment. I think the Hormones series is speaking to me; I know her [Dao's] feelings about the unforeseen difficulties and she should have used emergency contraception. It is a very real issue in society now. You know, finally Dao has a period, meaning that she wasn't pregnant after all! She did have sex without protection, so the series warns teenagers to think carefully before having sex and suggests ways not to get pregnant. (Noi, 20, employee, Houayxay)

This small group of young participants from Houayxay do not clearly understand about contraceptive methods, yet receive sex education through watching Thai soap series. The 2005 LRHS²⁴ showed that 4.9 per cent of female Lao adolescents aged 15-19 do not use contraception due to a lack of knowledge. Importantly, the first Lao national family planning conference in 2017²⁵ showed adolescent contraceptive use is low, at 22.3 per cent, and unmet need for contraception is 22.6 per cent. My participant's comment also suggests that she relates to TV storylines because of her experience of having had an abortion to protect herself after she did not practice safe sex. The participant associates the portrayal of a fragmented family with communication loss between two characters (mother and a daughter) with her real life. The representation of the two characters in the series Hormones (May 2013-December 2015) implies a degree of maturity on the part of the soap operas in dealing with the issue of unplanned pregnancies. The young rural participant noted above provides evidence that premarital sex and teenage pregnancy arise in contemporary Laos and stresses the importance of good sex education for teenagers.

My findings further point out that in general Lao women who do have an unplanned pregnancy choose between two options: either their parents help them out by raising their babies, or else they go to other countries to have an abortion, which is illegal in Laos. In this event, it is a form of cross-border diffusion of a social problem (Best, 2001) between Thailand and Laos. As a 25-year-old vendor from Houayxay and a 22-year-old student articulate:

You have to understand that we are not ready to be young mums;
we are worried about our lives and the possible social impacts, so

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Lao People's Democratic Republic held its first-ever national family planning conference on 3 May 2017, with support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Family Planning 2020 (FP2020). Available at: <http://www.familyplanning2020.org/articles/19524>

some people decide to have an abortion; however, they need to be careful and choose the safest procedure; many women die as a result of unsafe abortions. I have heard about its dangers on Lao radio. (Keaw, 25, vendor, Houayxay)

I think parents let children stay alone too much. When teenagers stay alone, they usually get in a muddle about sexuality especially when they see improper behaviour in the media, and they want to try it themselves. Some people make mistakes and end up with an unintended pregnancy. But in Lao, abortion is illegal, so it is not available in Laos. It is also considered to be a severe sin to kill an innocent child. This crisis is usually handled by the girl's parents who raise the baby instead of the mother. Some people have abortions, but they have to go somewhere else outside Laos, like Thailand. (Soi, 22, student, Vientiane)

The participants' views on abortion also take into account how the Lao government employs radio broadcasts to educate the public about premarital pregnancy and abortion in order to mitigate this social problem and to subvert this socio-cultural incursion. The media is thus used as a strategy to work with political institutions in various activities and campaigns to spread information (Rohlinger, 2006). In a sense, it can be assumed that Lao television and newspapers, as they are controlled by the state, may be employed to propagandise political and cultural views on women's lifestyle in relation to the issues of abortion and teenage pregnancy.

6.3.4 Participants' views on homosexuality and the LGBT community

The consumption of Thai soap operas acts as a lens through which the differences in Laotian viewers' attitudes and values regarding relationships can be demonstrated. In addition to the emergence of issues such as premarital sex, teenage pregnancy, divorce, and abortion as features which are seen to be undermining traditional monogamous family lifestyles, traditional views on lesbian, gay, and transgender people are also changing. The increased visibility of LGBT lifestyles indicates some evidence of increased social freedom and individualisation (Giddens, 1991, 1992). Previous research has shown that American series' representations of queer content and characters produce a general decrease in viewers' prejudices against the homosexual community (Symes, 2017; Gillig *et al.*, 2017). In my study, LGBT characters who are also portrayed as people 'of good character' in Thai television soaps similarly gain acceptance in a strongly patriarchal country such as Laos.

A large majority (87 per cent) of the participants from urban and rural cities adopted a broad-minded attitude towards same-sex couples. These participants are of various ages between 18 and 45 and have diverse occupations and social status. They say that they are more receptive to same-sex unions largely because Thai soap operas represent LGBT characters in a positive light. The wide acceptance of sexual diversity relevant to the LGBT characters has been portrayed with better roles and images in Thai soaps, which reframe homosexuality as not abnormal for Thai audiences (Ngarmwuthiworn, 2010; Vongmoung and Srikullavong, 2016). Viewing Thai TV soap operas also influences forty-six participants' attitudes in my study, in particular young women persuading my participants to accept that LGBT people should be able to express their sexuality freely. As two students in Vientiane state:

I am neutral about homosexuality. I think Thai television often presents this issue, but in the past Laotians didn't understand because it was hidden because, it was repressed. It started when I was in high school and university, where I first witnessed it. I think it's fair to say that there are more representations of LGBT people in Thai media now. But in Laos, we don't like to be overtly gay, even though we know homosexuality exists. Lao society does not fully accept it. A few people make negative comments about gays and lesbians because they are not masculine and not feminine, but the situation is getting much better because of Thai television. It really has had an impact on Lao society. A lot of Thai teenagers also are homosexual [smiling]. For the LGBT issue, Thai TV was a wake-up call. (Toon, 22, student, Vientiane)

I have no doubts about the abilities of LGBT characters in Thai soap operas to compete with straight genders' competencies. Importantly, I realise that Thailand has receptiveness about LGBT people because they are on screen. This issue is quite hard in Laos. It's very different. It is probable that Laotians are more receptive to the idea of LGBT freedom and LGBT people today. (Pecky, 20, student, Vientiane)

My participants also disapproved of sexual discrimination since they understood that people's sexual orientations vary. The participants explain that LGBT characters in Thai soap operas are often portrayed as very kind people, and that this enables Lao participants to overlook their non-traditional sexual orientations. The views of a 46-year-old business woman from Vientiane and a 22-year-old waitress from Bolikhamsai indicate an acceptance of homosexuality:

I think the issue of homosexuality is a natural one for human beings. It is a gender balance. We must accept that everyone can live together and respect one another. We should not make fun of people because they are gay. If we do, we make too much trouble.

We sometimes see that LGBT people can improve society, they can have a useful life. Gay, queer and transgender people usually play a role as Nang Ake's [a leading actress] best friend or her advisor about love and work. They get along famously. (Klang, 45, businesswoman, Vientiane)

I don't know how to explain it. It's normal to choose our lifestyles and preferences. We should be open-minded and accept LGBT people. It's not written in stone that men should stick to women or women have to marry men. I am a massive fan of Tina and Aom [Thai actresses who play a lesbian couple]. I am very friendly with a Thai Tom [a lesbian person]. (New, 22, waitress, Bolikhamsai)

In line with other socio-cultural changes regarding sexuality and gender, the acceptance and understanding of homosexual people in Laos is therefore broadening significantly. The Lao government appears to be supportive of LGBT issues in order to move the country forwards in terms of socio-economic development. This view is garnered from a personal tribute that the president of the Lao People's Democratic Republic paid to Piyada Inthavong, known as Lingling, a Lao transgender woman, who was also one of my participants. This tribute was paid because Lingling has helped to improve the image of the country with her career achievement and good behaviour; she is a Lao model and actress who portrays in a beauty pageant in a Thai soap opera. In this sense, Lao society, from a political perspective, is undergoing a significant change in attitudes towards LGBT rights and becoming much more tolerant of the LGBT community.

I think my country is a developing nation and being a member of the (ASEAN), Lao society is therefore more receptive to the idea of LGBT people in every occupation nowadays. (Lingling Piyada, 23, transgender woman, 2nd runner up Miss International Queen 2014, model and actress, Vientiane)

A beautiful transgender woman like Lingling is an example that proves that Lao society is receptive to the idea of transgender and gay people. The president of Laos encourages and chats with Lingling in person since she behaves well and improves the reputation of the country. (Baifern, 29, Businesswoman, Vientiane)

However, a minority of my participants had serious reservations about homosexuality and the LGBT community. These participants (7) come from upper-, middle- and working-class sample groups, and included both adolescents and young adults living in urban and rural areas of Laos. They insist that people should be 'normal'. It was clear from their opinions that they think

people should be attracted by the opposite sex. They disapprove of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender people since they see it as an artificial sexuality and deviant sexual behaviour. In this respect, the debate about sexual outcomes for my participants focuses on the nature versus nurture argument (Anderson *et al.*, 2000). The participants' prejudices against homosexuality come from their established preconceptions about the reality of innate sex and sexual preference, which should follow the traditional values of femininity and masculinity. Even if they seem to understand that people's developing sexuality is socially and culturally constructed, the male or female sex should be straight in their beliefs. As a 20-year-old farmer and waitress in Bolikhamsai and a 31-year-old teacher in Vientiane opine:

I don't think it is a normal circumstance because men naturally match up to women. We have fixed couples. Why do we need to change it? (Kade, 20, farmer and waitress, Bolikhamsai)

I don't want my children to be homosexual. They should be either female or male. But we cannot control it because of environmental and cultural changes. I really dislike it. (Ki, 31, governmental officer, Vientiane)

Overall, there is a dynamic tension between young Lao women's striving for independence in romantic relationships and family life and state policy on families and culture. This study argues that young Lao women are enjoying improvements in their individual socioeconomic circumstances in a wider collectivist culture, and tend to enhance their own individual self. The traditional family structure in Laos is to live in extended families with up to four generations, but the younger, educated participants today choose to live in a nuclear family (parents and children) to expand personal space, save money, and avoid familial conflicts. At the same time, however, they express their respect and gratitude to parents and elderly.

Traditional values of femininity have been modified to absorb aspirations for freedom in relationships and lifestyles by young participants who have educational qualifications, careers and comparatively higher income levels, especially in urban areas. Their partial rejection of traditional norms of femininity is leading to an increase in social questions which have hitherto been relatively rare in Lao society, such as premarital sex and teenage pregnancies. Young educated women are also choosing cohabitation over marriage as they desire more choice and equality in their sexual relationships, delaying marriage to pursue career aims. It is thus likely that younger, more educated participants in this study do not fully conform to the 'Cultural Family' policy programme of the government. In contrast, other, middle-aged and elderly

participants, have less favourable attitudes towards modern trends such as cohabitation and abortion.

Addressing the participants' views on the issues raised in this study, including cohabitation, premarital sex, teenage pregnancy, and abortion, highlights the challenge the government faces in terms of education and family planning policies. A combination of adequate modern family planning and female education will aim to reduce the number of adolescent pregnancies and at the same time increase women's household autonomy and improve their earning power. The government's attempts in family planning policies to improve women's education and women's health and quality of life will help to improve gender equality and rights for Lao women.

6.4 Conclusion

The acceleration of socio-economic development in Laos and Lao people's enjoyment of watching Thai TV soap operas are of paramount importance in the current transformation of the Lao family. Romantic storylines in Thai soap operas are the lens through which social changes in modern Laos, in particular Vientiane, can be understood. I identify five key points in this conclusion to explain the influence of Thai soap storylines on Lao women's changing attitudes towards agency, identity and lifestyle.

Firstly, seventy per cent of young, middle-class, educated, female participants in Vientiane successfully live in a nuclear family, a model that is associated with modernity and individualisation. The participants regard this type of family, with its small number of members, as a form of modern family with a stable financial status. In fact, the participants actually live in small family units but still have family ties with elderly parents and relatives. In addition, they are able to balance their personal lives (pursuing their dreams and careers) and family lives (being a good daughter). Their increasing individual agency is thus not a major obstacle to detraditionalisation in Laos. Older participants, meanwhile, never ceased to be generous wives even, after in situations of adultery.

Secondly, the majority of less-educated, working-class, middle-aged and elderly participants in rural areas found themselves in a particularly difficult position, caught in the web of entanglements which mark a quickly modernising society set against long-standing social and cultural norms. They cling to the family bond modelled by their parents and relatives, who

stayed together in a marriage, since they have a deep appreciation for their overwhelming generosity and respect their advice. The participants are wives who have diverse duties while working outside the home, including raising children, housekeeping, and taking care of their husbands and his parents, and usually watch Thai soap operas to escape the gendered inequality in their daily lives. They desire for choices in an equal relationship.

Thirdly, many of the teenage participants in Vientiane seem to have more individual agency regarding romantic relationships. They believe that cohabitation is a part of the marriage process. This potent conception of individualisation and freedom is reducing Lao women's traditional concept of monogamy in relation to morality and sexuality. A small number of experiences with teenage pregnancy and abortion also reflect the importance of sex education. However, middle-aged women in rural areas who still believe in the traditional values of femininity disagree with both cohabitation and abortion, the latter largely due to the influence of religious beliefs.

Fourthly, a number of the young, rural, working-class teenage participants who have limited choices in education and lifestyles usually show gratitude to their parents. Deep gratitude and respect of the elderly, therefore, are key cultural markers of Lao women's gender roles. Gender biasing in relation to educational opportunity and gender roles as caretakers and supporters within patriarchal families has not changed that much.

Fifthly, exposure to Thai soap operas paves the way for the participants to be more receptive of the LGBT community, since representations of LGBT characters in these programmes has broadened some Laotians' minds and reduced sexual discrimination. These characters' independence and their pride in themselves is accelerating Laotians' ability to accept their own sexualities. Nevertheless, a small group of participants disagreed with same-sex relationships because of their traditional belief in masculinity and in binary gender. The Lao government seems to be compromising on same-sex unions, and homosexuality therefore no longer carries the stigma it once did, although this is partly conditional on notions of 'of good character' and being competent at their jobs.

In addition to academic justification of TV audience studies and the concept of individualisation and detraditionalisation introduced by Giddens (1992), my study suggests the influence of Thai soap opera storylines on the different lives of Lao female viewers, increase individual choice and more independent life in relation to intimate relationships. The extent of cohabitation,

teenage pregnancy and attitudes towards sexuality all seem to suggest a more forward-looking and inclusive cultural sensibility which privileges autonomy over the collectivism. In that sense, Lao culture is seeing a shift in terms of an increasing individualisation and an embrace of different cultures, even as women simultaneously accept, to some extent, their 'duties' as daughters, wives and mothers in line with traditional culture. Therefore, Lao women present magnitude of cultural hybridity in the context of globalisation.

The next chapter discusses the third theme – the pursuit of beauty as a form of enhancement – as well as cosmetic surgery in Lao society, which are influenced consciously and unconsciously by the viewing of Thai soap operas by Lao women.

Chapter 7. Beauty Consumption and Soap Opera Protagonists' Portrayals of Women's Bodies as White, Thin and Beautiful

7.1 Introduction

Lao women's notions of beauty and the popularity of cosmetic surgery as a means to become beautiful are heavily influenced by Thai TV soaps. Their understanding of standards of beauty is the corollary of participants' soap opera viewing across all social classes, influencing their identity and agency. This chapter examines the implications of beauty and cosmetic surgery on Lao women's lifestyles, drawing on the audience studies approach of Hall's (1980) encoding-decoding model as well as feminist approaches towards women's agency and emancipation in contemporary Western media developed by McRobbie (2009), Gill (2007) and other late modern feminist theorists. Since the rapid growth of Lao's economy, in particular in the capital, consumerism and capitalism have contributed to changing Lao women's social aspirations, partly through Thai television viewing. We live in an era in which the media's representations of beauty seek to modify social values such as personal virtues, aspirations, and physical attractiveness, and this is as true across large parts of the Asian continent as it is in many other parts of the world. Lao women also engage with the concept of beauty as it is figured in Thai soaps, in which depictions of beauty and aspirations to achieve it are elided with a woman's right to freedom. This desire for enhanced beauty, including cosmetic surgery, is the third theme in this study. This chapter explores a desire for enhanced beauty by female Lao viewers, which relates to women's embodied identity, agency and social class.

A preoccupation with beauty and the body is common in contemporary Lao society, particularly among younger women (High, 2004; Kidkamsaun, 2014), as evidenced partly through their consumption of Thai TV soaps. One consequence of this is a heightened engagement by Lao women with consumerism, including the increasing popularity of cosmetic surgery. In this research, the relationship between beauty practices and femininity is reflected in women's desires for a transformation of their appearance through such things as the phenomenon of skin lightening (Hill, 2002; Lewis, 2011), attempts to enhance their attractiveness using facial interventions, and even a desire to undergo cosmetic surgery. It is important to address the fact that young Lao women as an audience today negotiate between norms of conventional Lao

female beauty and the standard of beauty ideals represented in media showing the illusion of agency and liberation of women (Gill, 2007).

However, there is an inherent tension running through this negotiation, between open acceptance and tolerance on the one hand, and the Lao government's attempts to restrict the practices associated with what Lao women see on Thai television so as to maintain a 'moral and cultural order' which is more in keeping with Lao traditions and norms. One example of the government's concerns about Thai TV weakening or diluting Lao women's traditional identity is the prohibition of cosmetic surgery for contestants in beauty pageants, such as in Miss Lao 2015. The Lao government is attempting to maintain traditional femininity and a beauty ideal of Lao ethnic women as a signifier of national identity. This study employs focus group discussions with 53 female Lao viewers and 15 TV diarists showing their modern beauty desires and practices (as influenced by consumption of Thai television programmes), desires and practices deemed inappropriate for traditional ideas of beauty. This chapter, therefore, also highlights the cultural preservation of Laos's national identity, which is to a degree determined by state policy, in relation to Lao women's choices in their body transformations.

The first section of this chapter - 'The recent phenomenon of whiteness' – describes how Lao women's choice for white-skin tones as a way of enhancing their appearance has become popular in Laos. The second section - 'Body dissatisfaction and the resulting behaviours' - describes how individual participants' attitudes are constructed around keeping fit and being in good shape, and towards having a sexually attractive body to boost their choices, status and class. The third section - 'Different views on cosmetic surgery' - discusses how cosmetic surgery is perceived by Lao females as being about women's empowerment to obtain the 'ideal' female body.

7.2 The recent phenomenon of whiteness

The first aspect of women's choices about their body appearance, largely transmitted via Thai television soap operas consumption, is the phenomenon of skin whitening. The yearning for skin whitening among Lao women in Vientiane emerged early in the focus group discussions. One third of the participants used UV umbrellas and wore a variety of hats and sunglasses to protect themselves from the sun's rays. It seems that the notion of whiteness is considered important in Lao women's lives today, as was the case in High's research which showed whiteness was regarded a symbol of superiority among Lao women (High, 2004).

In this study, Lao women from different socio-economic levels and age groups actively engage in this desire for skin whitening, which is relevant to the colourism issue. Since Thai media and TV soap operas feature almost all-white or light-skinned women, it confirms the cultural construction of whiteness as ideal beauty, thereby equating white beauty with physical attractiveness (Hunter, 2005). It is clearly evident that *telenovelas* often portray actors who have white skin tone (Jones, 2004). These media images “influence the performance of the labour market” (Espino and Franz, 2002, p. 612) – lighter-skinned people have a significant advantage in high status careers and prestige (Hill, 2000; Mason, 2004). This study also found better chances for fair-skinned women to achieve high-paid occupations and social status than dark-skinned women, constituting a sense of colourism in Lao society.

Firstly, five young upper-class participants in Vientiane, working in the entertainment industry, are especially concerned with having white skin, which they saw as desirable and a symbol of power. They regard it as one of the highest priorities in estimations of physical beauty. Their ideas of beauty, which tally with the findings of Hill (2002) and Lewis (2011), were of being good-looking and light-skinned at the same time in order to enhance their attractiveness and confidence. Whiteness has also become one of their beauty choices to display enhanced status and wealth (Kenway and Bullen 2011). For example, many women in Asia and South America desire whitening creams and gels, which are regularly featured in television programmes and commercials (Dixon, 2006; Glenn, 2008; Watson *et al.*, 2010). Skin cosmetic products such as whitening creams and other beauty products have thus become must-have items for the upper-class participants, indicating a certain degree of consumerism of Lao women’s lives. In this sense, whitening creams are seen “as a form of symbolic capital” (Glenn, 2008, p. 281). As two singers constantly in the media spotlight explain:

There is no doubt that bands and Thai TV stars have an impact on audience, in particular teenagers and young adult fans. These famous people are role models for thousands of Laotians. They desire to be beautiful and even to have fair skin like their favourite idols and presenters. Thai media and TV commercials have a huge influence on us. They indulge us, especially the youth. Lao people look after their appearance because the media attracts a lot of attention in society, so people want to competitively show off their beautiful appearances. I think that, today, Lao society has developed to a point where beauty trends are starting to affect our lives. That’s why people follow the new trends and adapt themselves to fit contemporary beauty trends. You can see that there are many skin-whitening products, vitamin supplements,

and a variety of beauty products. It's quite phenomenal. (Pattama, 29, Singer, Vientiane)

For my beauty and fair skin, I go for spa treatments and use moisture creams. I think making yourself have fair skin is good for everybody. I try to find facial products to use for washing my face, I use facial creams and lotions and I have other treatments too, so my face looks youthful and fair-skinned. All these facial products are very important for me. Looking after yourself by having good health and an attractive appearance makes you feel confident about yourself. The more beautiful you look when you go out to social events the more confident you will be about yourself. No one wants to look unattractive when they go out. It is normal nowadays for people to prioritise making themselves look attractive and for them to have a bright skin tone. (Barbie Piyamarth, 23, actress, singer, model and 1st runner-up, Miss Lao 2013, Vientiane)

The consumption of skin-whitening products by upper-class Lao women emphasises their economic empowerment and allows them to assert themselves as cosmopolitan consumers through the use of cosmetics. Since they judge beauty by having fair skin, they believe that no beautiful women would not aspire to skin whitening. Additionally, their use of whitening skin cosmetics can be regarded as holding 'cultural capital' to maintain the hegemonic class of elites, professionals and capitalists. These values and practices are represented through Thai TV soap operas, music and advertising. This seems to suggest that the participants agree on the media messages of cosmetics, vitamin supplements and skincare products as a kind of vaccine to enhance their skin. More than a mere enhancement of beauty, the consumption of beauty products is also considered an essential factor in signalling their individualisation and agency, especially for those with privileged lives (Williams, 2010), with 71 per cent of upper-class participants covering their undesirable skin tones by applying whitening creams and by taking collagen and glutathione tablets or liquids to make their glow and give them a clear-looking complexion. Since light skin is coveted, their decisions about buying and using the fairness products signify their agency to have a beatific life.

The issue of whiteness in my study is a symbol of the attempt by women to be attractive to others, inspired by Thai actresses, who have commodified the ideals of the female body. The popularisation of whiteness by women is closely related to discourses of female beauty indicating a feminine value of superiority (Goon and Craven, 2003). In a sense, Thai soaps construct Thai actresses as heroines and these gender roles are transmitted to a female audience (Thomson and McDonald 2016). Likewise, Indian women's desires for a light complexion,

encouraged by Bollywood celebrities, have increased the growth of brightening creams in India (Parameswaran and Cardoza, 2009). A fair skin tone is very significant for Lao women, as it is perceived as being associated with a modern, privileged and beautiful individuality. In other words, being light-skinned redefines the social class and status of women in contemporary Laos. They believe that lighter skin tones will help them to improve their lives by getting a better job or win them love.

Skin-whitening is seen as a key symbol in portraying beauty amongst the nine middle-class participants from Vientiane. They have a variety of occupations, and partly judge people's class and status by their skin tone, findings that support Bowman *et al.* (2004) and Rondilla and Spickard (2007). The participants believe that having white skin is a passport to having a 'magic tool' that can afford them more of a right to speak out and that helps them to both wield more power within the patriarchal family and exhibit their authority in their workplaces. In this sense, women who enhance their whiteness elevate themselves in society to attract people's attention and negotiate men's misogynistic attitudes behind the guise of sexual empowerment. As an accountant, aged 26, and a translator, aged 24, state:

I believe that ordinary women are able to transform themselves into celebrities. You just try a course of treatment and find face creams to make your skin bright and white, and wear a lot of make-up and beautiful dresses. It is simply a basic way of enhancing beauty. I think white-skinned women are beautiful, and dark-skinned women are not. It is a question of social preferences; for example, if you look pretty, you will most likely find that male colleagues are more eager to help you. (Noi, 26, Accountant, Vientiane)

I am expected to be as physically beautiful as Dara [actress] is. I never forget to wear make-up because I am not confident without it. I also want to have bright and white skin like Grace Kanklao [a Thai actress]. All these things please me and make me feel good. Umm... women don't stop being beautiful, do they? A beautiful woman will be loved and warmly welcomed and her partners may obey her [giggling]. (Nikki, 24, translator, Vientiane)

This value of physical beauty of fair skin represented in media images does necessarily signify women's freedom and autonomy in reality. In this study, fair-skinned women believe they have more choices than dark-skinned ones, more life and employment opportunities. The participants believe that light-skinned women are more influential in society than dark-skinned women. This corresponds to research on the whiteness aspirations of women for privileges and status

(Esposito, 2011). This suggests that *informal* racial inequities across Lao women may be an issue, whereby fair-skinned people obtain advantageous positions in society. For example, a TV diarist wrote that she believes Nang-Ake (a leading female protagonist), as a light-skinned woman, is treated better and is more highly paid. She explains that Thai fair-skinned actresses such as Aum Patcharapa, Min Pechaya and Mint Chalida derive great opportunities for personal life, fame and fortune as actresses, models and product presenters, while female viewers as consumers are aspiring for skin whitening. In this context, there is a feminism discourse in Thai soap operas relates to female representations of freedom and empowerment in beauty aspirations. Therefore, women's images in the TV soap operas provide consumer culture, contrasted with rights and equity in women's viewers' homes, especially in Vientiane Laotians' community.

Secondly, and conversely, two middle-aged participants in Houayxay placed a higher value on a sense of inner, spiritual beauty of the mind rather than on physical beauty. They reject the representation of women in Thai soaps in terms of an ideal standard of beauty, but agree with the portrayal of what they see as women of 'good character'. Their perceptions are influenced by the idea of 'virtuous women' in terms of moral beauty with good manners and social graces. This implies women who seek to be physically attractive cannot also be virtuous and good character. As a 42-year old housewife from Houayxay states:

They are very plain actresses, yet they are nice, helpful and generous, they will finally develop into charming and beautiful women. Even if Nang-Ake's [an actress] appearance is not the most beautiful, she will be fine because of her habits, good behaviour and hard-work. She won't look down on people because they don't have money or because they are fat, black and ugly. There is virtue in such a person; her female beauty is a reflection of her goodness. I am a person who sees beauty from the inside. Dark skin is just a skin colour. Our true beauty is in our hearts. (Tuk, 42, housewife, Houayxay)

The responses from rural participants about women's moral beauty is evidence of a rejection of media portrayals of beauty standards. It can be argued, therefore, that they do not pursue popular beauty ideals such as skin-whitening. Among these participants, there is a view that beauty is natural and related to the inner self. The attitude of middle-aged and rural participants with less economic power also suggests that women's moral beauty is a vital component of the social emancipation of women in Lao communities, such as issues of racial discrimination and different social classes. In contrast to the above, it could be argued that these middle-aged

women are stressing moral virtue because they are not in a financial position to undertake the types of cosmetic interventions that the soap protagonists are. Their admiration for women's 'inner moral beauty' is thus a defensive and pragmatic solution in their ongoing negotiation between the wealthier class of women (upper and middle classes) and lower or working class women.

Another perspective can be witnessed in the responses of two thirds of the rural working class participants, who range in age from their early thirties to their early forties, in Houayxay and Bolikhamsai. These women, who have a low income and unostentatious lifestyles, do not try to become white-skinned and they believe that 'karma' is the reason for their current appearance. They consider whiteness and a perfect body are symbols of rich people who have more agency to improve their appearances. They also accept that this beauty ideal is a media construction and bound up with consumption and wealth. Race or genes are not regarded as the main factors in skin lightening in the eyes of the Lao women: rather, money is seen as being the force that can make this happen. In this context, the desire for beauty and whiteness for the participants living in rural areas is linked to their life of poverty, limited personal choice, their – religiously inspired - belief in fate, their low self-esteem, anxieties, and defensiveness that comes about from the comparisons they make with women in other social classes. Three working-class adult participants, from Houayxay and Bolikhamsai, explain this:

I don't know what to say about beauty. My skin has been exposed to UV light every day, since I usually ride my motorcycle to work, so it is difficult for me to get fair skin. I know some people are very eager to emulate the beauty of Thai actresses and actors, who are lucky to be such beautiful people, but I do not share this desire. For example, Aum Patcharapa [a famous Thai actress] – her prettiness is matched by her wealth, but I prefer natural beauty. I will change something that is sensible and affordable, such as my hairstyle and hair colour. To be clear, you can be as beautiful as you want, if you have enough money. (Pat, 33, teacher, Houayxay)

I really like the beauty of those actresses: they are white, thin and sexy women. We differ greatly in appearance though [...] I'll be waiting for a perfect body in my next life [smiling], but I am happy in my life; I have what I need, and I feel pleased enough with the things that I possess. (Buakham, 34, vendor, Houayxay)

Thai actresses are beautiful and they have an international look, since some are half-Thai and half Farang [Westerners]. They have a very good skin tone and a model's height. We cannot compare ourselves to them; they are actresses needed to be pretty. They are

also rich, it's surely possible for them to remain youthful. (Neung, 41, merchant, Bolikhamsai)

It is evident from these responses that whiteness is a central component in the definition of beauty, femininity and social class in present day Laos. Achieving whiter skin is linked to processes of social mobility and empowerment, as portrayed by leading Thai female protagonists, and hence it is ranked as important by many, although not all, participants. The sources of the desire for whiteness can be traced back by most of them to the influence of Thai TV soap operas. While whiteness is seen uncritically as aspirational by many participants, it also indicates a more troubling dissatisfaction with their own bodies and status in life. The following section will expand on this by exploring other areas of bodily dissatisfaction and the consequences of this.

7.3 Body dissatisfaction and the resulting behaviours

Many Lao women are preoccupied with their bodies and seem to experience some dissatisfaction and have a desire to have a healthy and sexy body, features which they see regularly through their viewing of Thai TV protagonists' lives. The attitudes and aspirations of women for the perfect body are previously and widely evident in academic studies. Supporting existing research (e.g. Murnen *et al.*, 2003; Swami *et al.*, 2010; Khan *et al.*, 2011), this research provides evidence that Lao women as audiences also consider having a slim body as a hallmark of physical attractiveness. The body images of Thai actresses are seen as beneficial by twenty-five of the young women, in both Vientiane and the countryside, as they are sometimes motivated to exercise and eat a healthier and balanced diet in order to improve their bodies. This section shows how female Thai protagonists' images impact on the participants' desires to improve their bodies, disarticulating notions of women's individualisation, choice, and empowerment (Gill, 2007).

Young participants at all levels of economic status and in both urban and rural environments are likely to embrace the idea of body shape standards and changing their body size, in a variety of ways, in order to achieve their thinner body. The participants spoke about body dissatisfaction and how it has been triggered by their consumption of Thai media, in particular television soap operas. My study shows how Lao female viewers from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds aspire to be good looking with the type of bodies they see in TV soap portrayals of Thai protagonists. This study found that beauty ideals influenced by western

formats and presented in Thai TV soaps impact on some young Lao female viewers. Similarly, the quantitative and qualitative results of studies on Western television programmes representing thin women impact non-Western women's attitudes to female figures and increase anxiety with weight (Becker, 2004; Xu *et al.*, 2010; Swami *et al.*, 2010; Khan *et al.*, 2011).

Fifteen upper-class and middle-class participants living in Vientiane, both teenagers and young adults, tend to focus on keeping fit to achieve and maintain an improved body shape. These participants have agency (and the funds) to consistently work out in the gym in order to increase their attractiveness and keep fit. They also have a positive belief in keeping healthy and adopting good eating behaviours, which they associate with their careers and social status. In a sense, in expressing their 'taste of luxury' or 'taste of freedom' (Bourdieu, 1984) the participants seek the ideal body. Therefore, these participants renegotiate and reassert their identities, choices and the individual empowerment of the ideal female body that is inspired by Thai actresses' portrayals of ideal womanhood. Three Vientiane women explain their desires for body fitness:

For me, I go for the leading protagonist, Aum Patchrapa [a Thai famous actress] – I like her shape and skin tone, her height and her acting. While I was watching her soaps, I thought she was super-beautiful. I like Pancake too [a Thai actress and model]. Aum is very youthful, she looks fit and lean. I want to believe I can have her body. She was cultivated as an ideal of womanhood. (Kuk, 26, master student, Vientiane)

I love exercise, both cardio and weightlifting. I like going to the gym and working out to develop my body strength and fitness. As I am getting older, I feel some changes in my body, and I am not comfortable with them. I want my physical body to look fit like Chompoo Araya [a famous Thai actress]. In my view, the simple and important thing is to have no belly. Moreover, I prefer to eat healthy food, not foods that are oily or fatty, and I like to drink a lot of water. (Baifern, 29, Singer, Vientiane)

I think having a good shape is a metaphor for a magic pill. I have attempted to keep my body balanced. I always take care of myself with a calorie-controlled diet, eating some fruit and fresh food. I have to exercise a few times a week. Exercise has become my part of daily routine, like for other actresses. (Barbie Piyamarth, 23, actress, singer, model and 1st runner-up of Miss Lao 2013, Vientiane)

Secondly, ten working-class teenagers and young adult participants in Vientiane and Bolikhamsai are unanimous in their admiration for thinness and slim bodies. Indeed, the

participants note that Thai TV soap operas are replete with images of thin women and portrayals of sexy, strong and fit female beauty which triggered in them higher levels of body dissatisfaction, lower self-esteem, and the development of eating disorders. My study has similar findings to the quantitative studies of the influence of images of beauty in glossy magazines which are purported to cause body shame (Monro and Huon, 2005), low self-esteem with weight (Wilcox and Laird, 2000), and body images disorders (Xu *et al.*, 2010). The participants also accept that the thin TV characters portrayed in Thai soap operas cause them to be anxious about their body shape, affecting their choice of clothes and their eating and dieting habits. Thus, the media factor, particularly the effects of Thai soap operas, impacts Lao teenagers and young women in this study in a way that makes them worry about their bodies. As these three young participants articulate:

I like the sort of actress who is skinny, beautiful and sexy. I sometimes want to change my figure since I dislike my fat belly and thighs. I am afraid to show them, and that's why I have to wear oversized clothes and dark colours. (Keaw, 21, student, Vientiane)

I admire Aum Patcharapa [a famous Thai actress]. I always watch her TV series. Her beauty kills me. Her lips are very sexy and her shape looks terrific. I have attempted to lose weight by skipping dinner and eating more vegetables. (Petch, 25, lottery seller, Bolikhamsai)

I want to be like Nang-Ake [a leading female protagonist], I want to have her beautiful figure. I like Aum Patcharapa because she has a slender body; she is so pretty and sexy. She is also tall, with big eyes and long hair. (Fah, 22, merchant, Bolikhamsai)

Thirdly, and conversely, the influence of Thai actresses' bodies on a small group of rural participants aged over 50 was negligible. Two participants from Houayxay accept that their body size changes naturally in old age. This research suggests that middle-aged and elderly rural participants do not accept the same equation of femininity with thinness which marks the representation of women in Thai TV soap operas. The participants seem to be active and not dependent on beauty ideals in the mainstream media. A 51 year old farmer who refuses to fat shame states:

A slender waist and thin body is promoted to a large number of adolescents and young women. Thai actresses are beautiful, but I am too old to think about it. My weight is uncertain and it changes

naturally as I get older. I am not worried about my size. (Somporn, 51, farmer, Houayxay)

Two other crucial factors in Lao women's modern lifestyles related to dissatisfaction with their bodies are smoking and drinking alcohol. Six young participants from Bolikhamsai showed that alcohol consumption or smoking depicted in Thai soap operas was linked to their body size in terms of an increase or decrease in weight. Although far from widespread due to customary disapproval, there is nevertheless a creeping acceptance of drinking alcohol and smoking amongst women in Laos. For the participants in this research, while there is evidence that smoking and drinking alcohol often co-exist (Kristjansson *et al.*, 2011), drinking appears to be less of a cause for concern than smoking. Lao women who smoke are traditionally regarded as deviant, undermining traditional ideals of Lao femininity and cultural beliefs (Measham, 2002; Lyons and Willott, 2008). Three teenage farm workers from Bolikhamsai, who also work as karaoke bar hostesses, explain it thus:

Drinking alcohol is an acceptable thing for me and for other women, but if you drink often and too much, it'll make you gain some weight. While cigarette smoking is not an accepted social norm for females, there are some Lao women who enjoy a smoke. It does not make me feel good, and it is not good for my beauty and health, so that's why I don't smoke. (Fon, 18, farmer and bar hostess, Bolikhamsai)

No one can get Lao women drunk. Lao women are alcohol-tolerant [laughing]. I am totally fine with alcohol, but there was a slight increase in my weight after a week of drinking beer. So, I need to control my diet since I drink every day. (Da, 19, farmer and bar hostess, Bolikhamsai)

Teenagers always enjoy a leisurely stroll in department stores, shopping, watching Thai TV, Thai films, listening to Thai music, and makeup and beauty products. I like them all. There is also a trend for young teenagers to smoke to control their weight and to drink to look cool. I think cigarette smoking is disgusting for women, but it is fine for men. (New, 20, farmer and bar hostess, Bolikhamsai)

It cannot be argued that women's consumption of Thai TV soap operas is the only significant factor that impacts on participants' alcohol and smoking habits in relation to their body and weight concerns. It is argued here that personal and sociocultural factors in the lives of the teenage rural participants, with limited choices in education and careers, play important roles in explaining their understanding of liberated behaviour. More generally, of course, a lack of education undermines young Lao women's agency and individualisation in Bolikhamsai.

These participants further explain that they come from very poor families and have to unwillingly drop out of schooling after junior high (at the age of 15) in order to give their male siblings a chance to study. They then have to work to support the family, helping parents on rice farms for around six months in Bolikhamsai and for the remaining six months they cross the border to Bueng Karn province in Thailand to work in karaoke bars or as hostesses. Their working day starts at 5 pm and ends at 2 am, but they can earn a lot of money in this job, relatively speaking. Indeed, the participants' soap viewings here act as a lens through which their lives can be assessed. They continue to talk about the fact that if they want to get more money or tips, they have to keep looking good by wearing nice clothes, taking care of their bodies and controlling their weight, which encourages male customers to buy more drinks. Typically, they need to drink alcohol with the customers, who might fondle them in the process, so they may consume alcohol as a coping mechanism.

It seems fair to suggest that young Bolikhamsai teenagers' ability to control their weight is compromised by their alcohol consumption, which is integrated into their capacity to receive a good wage and to support their family, but at the cost of their education and career advancement. There is recurring evidence shown that the ideal body for, especially young, Lao women living in both urban areas and the countryside is that portrayed by a specific set of values conveyed by Thai actresses. They also actively consider engaging with procedures and practices to transform their bodies, an idea that is further explored in the next section.

7.4 Different views on cosmetic surgery

According to Catherine Hesse-Swan (2002, 2006), popular Thai TV programmes impact on Lao Isan²⁶ youths' identity formation in relation to perceptions of beauty. One of her interviewees states that "... Isan look is not beautiful to Thai people so if you are Khon Isan or you have na lao, what we call na lao – Lao face or Isan face. If you have na lao you cannot be famous –or you can be famous but you cannot be what we call beautiful..." (Hesse-Swan, 2006, p. 257). This study has established that the consumption of Thai TV soaps by Lao women impacts on their changing attitudes towards beauty and on their dissatisfaction with their bodies. In addition to this, the influence of such programmes in reshaping Lao women's bodies and general appearance results in a desire for cosmetic surgery, which will be discussed in this

²⁶ Lao Isan people originally migrated from Laos to live in the Northeast of Thailand. In other words, they have Lao origin or ethnicity and have uncertain and ambiguous views as a result of being caught between Thai and Lao (Isan) identity (Hesse-Swan, 2002).

section. Body dissatisfaction often leads to a desire for cosmetic surgery, which is a sign of a form of discontent with self. Cosmetic surgery is a form of consumption that reflects a person's purchasing power and social status (Hopkins, 2007). Body, beauty and economic opportunities seem to be associated with women's lives in Laos and are further linked to increased feelings of satisfaction. Body image and facial attractiveness have become crucial in the lifestyles of some of the participants in my study.

The ideal body presented by Thai actresses in the form of television soap operas explicitly defines acceptable physical characteristics. This can be a slim female figure and also prescribe a particular set of facial features which are portrayed in the Western media as feminine beauty (Tincknell, 2011). My study demonstrates that Thai soap operas and TV commercials (Thai female actresses working as presenters of cosmetic products) tend to peddle 'thin, white, pointed nose, and smooth oval face', encouraging dissatisfaction for some young participants. For example, Thai beauty drink advertisements have been found to promote slim figures to women consumers in Thailand (Wongthai, 2013). The number of desirable physical characteristics, both facial and body-shape, is increasing and is having an impact on the lives of some participants in both urban and rural areas in Laos. The main objective of cosmetic surgery is to enhance physical appearance, to alter a person's attractiveness, as defined by the American Board of Cosmetic Surgery (ABCS, 2016), and it includes face surgery, liposuction, and facial and skin rejuvenation.

These body modifications and the use of beauty clinics reflect the participants' desires to have an international or a Western appearance, as these changes are a departure from the indigenous physiognomy of Lao women. If the 25 young women participants' inclinations towards cosmetic surgery are influenced by their exposure to Thai TV soaps, the following questions need to be answered: why and how do they want to improve their appearance? And how does the Lao government react to this potential disruption of traditional notions of female beauty as a means of constructing national identity?

Thai TV economic news in ASIAN regions has reported that a *Wuttisak*²⁷ [a Thai beauty clinic] in Vientiane is the number one for Laotians. "Even though there are only about 6 million people in Laos, the purchasing power here is extremely high. It is surprising that sales got off to a hot start on the first day of opening. Most Laotians pay in cash for their rhinoplasty to strengthen

²⁷ 15 per cent economic growth for four branches of Wuttisak clinics in Vientiane, Pakse, Luang Prabang, and Savannakhet. [Online], Thairath (26 October 2013). Available at <https://www.thairath.co.th/content/378502>.

the nose, breast augmentation and double eyelid surgery” (Jaw-Loke Settakij, Channel. 3, 6 May 2013). It seems that Laotians, particular in Vientiane, are attracted to having beauty treatments and cosmetic surgery. These desires for body transformation are related to a moral panic in the media about traditional values of feminine beauty. As McRobbie and Thornton (1995) note, values are known to be implicated in numerous moral panics. Since some Laotians appreciate beauty ideals and well-being; meanwhile, they take national identity and ethnicity for granted. In this study, the moral panics have a calling towards Lao community’s capacity to tackle this latent and unspoken problem.

This situation reflects how Laos has absorbed many of the trends of reshaping facial and bodily beauty, especially in the capital city, and it is clear from four participants’ responses that they had undergone cosmetic surgery. This is the case, for instance, for Piyada (Lingling) Inthavong, who was third in the Miss International Queen competition in 2014, which is the world’s most prestigious and largest pageant for transgender women. Lingling admits that, as she very much admires Poyd Treechada, a Thai actress and Miss International Queen 2004, she decided to change her name and had cosmetic surgery to make her look like her idol after watching the role performed by Poyd in the Thai drama *Muay Inter*, in which she played the part of Lingling. Thus, the phenomenon of cosmetic surgery amongst young Lao women seems to have been partly influenced by the prevalence of desirable physical characteristics promoted by Thai media, especially TV soap operas.

In Vientiane, the increasing use of cosmetic surgery in the pursuit of a more attractive, youthful, lean and fit body has become a new beauty standard in Lao women’s quests for self-expression and upgrading their social class. Firstly, the desires of the five young upper-class participants (9.4 per cent), typically celebrities and young women who have professional careers with high incomes (about 1000-3000 GBP/month), are aimed at achieving enhanced facial features as well as an improved physique. It is clear that some upper-class participants had undergone cosmetic surgery, both surgical and nonsurgical, including augmented noses (about 600 GBP), the removal of facial lines and wrinkles with Botox injections (about 300 GBP), lifting combined with Filler and Meso to restore cheek and skin qualities (about 400 GBP), and brightening skin treatments (about 200 GBP/3 treatments). In my study, these beauty practices show the interplay between media, including Thai TV and the use of cosmetic surgery, as Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) and Nabi (2009) have researched in makeover programmes which correlated with viewers’ desires for cosmetic surgery. The participants who have

undergone cosmetic surgery are expressing their aspirations for a better life and for a higher social status through consumption of these goods and services.

Indeed, these wealthier participants (5 out of 53) noted as a small group of Lao women worry about their physical appearance and undergo cosmetic surgery to enhance their feminine identity with the empowering experience as influenced by Thai media and Thai actresses. They admit to having cosmetic surgery in order to enhance their beauty, health, and confidence, with the aim of achieving success in their lives and careers. This is a reflection of the spread of consumerist values in Laos. Similarly, modern young Chinese women undergo cosmetic surgery as a way of conspicuous consumption, aspiring to a professional life and a high social class (Lou, 2013). The construction of women's choice and individualisation through body transformation is pertinent to a 23 year old model and actress, a 21 year old singer, and a 23 year old beauty pageant contestant from Vientiane:

Beauty is a passage to new opportunities in life. We can see from our society that people with a beautiful appearance get more opportunities than other people who have got an equal ability to do the job. The value of beauty in current society has changed so much from what it was in the past. Fifty years ago, people did not worry as much about using aesthetic surgery to alter the appearance they were born with. But now it is almost crucial to have cosmetic surgery to look beautiful in every line of work. Thai TV soap and other media exert a major influence on us. To look as beautiful as I am today, I had sex reassignment surgery from male to female and to alter my face with many surgical procedures from rhinoplasty to injecting Botox into my buttocks (Lingling Piyada, 23, 2nd runner up Miss International Queen 2014, model, actress, Vientiane)

Personally, I think that having cosmetic surgery and injecting Botox to erase wrinkles and so on are good things for everybody. I feel delighted after treatment at the amazing Central Clinic. Everyone wants to look beautiful so it is a normal thing to do. We only have one life to live, so we need to enjoy it and make the most of our lives. For young people nowadays having cosmetic surgery is as common as buying new makeup. They consider it as one type of beauty product that is harmless and improves their lives. I also need to maintain my good looks for my fans (Lily, 23, model, Vientiane)

For me, most people, especially teenagers, want to become more beautiful. Cosmetic surgery provides an opportunity to satisfy these demands and it helps to increase our confidence levels. Also, cosmetic surgery is a private right, but one should not overdo it. I personally have only had special skin treatments. (Barbie

Piyamarth, 23, model and 1st runner-up Miss Lao 2013, Vientiane)

Although these ‘celebrity participants’ shape their own identities by physically altering their bodies using cosmetic surgery because of a desire to improve their social standing, social motivation, and status (Kurzman *et al.*, 2007), and, as Holliday and Elfving-Hwang (2012) have also found, their self-confidence. My study posits that the Thai television soap operas, advertisements and magazines available to Lao women to consume as well as other sociocultural factors are the main influences behind this behaviour. As Kajornkosol (2014) states, Thai females’ level of exposure to nine Thai fashion and entertainment magazines significantly affected their perception of the benefits of cosmetic surgery, which in turn significantly influenced their attitude towards it. These social expectations and personal factors are often the reasons behind Lao celebrities’ decisions to alter their facial features using cosmetic surgery in order to enhance their beauty and give them additional opportunities and status. In fact, Thailand itself has become a popular place for upper-class Lao consumers to undergo cosmetic procedures, both surgical and nonsurgical (there has been a boom in cosmetic surgery in Bangkok, see Aizura, 2009). A 25 year old businesswoman from Vientiane discussed this:

I think cosmetic surgery is a growing trend in Laos. It’s common and it’s not a big deal. We should improve ourselves by looking good and youthful. We don’t do anything wrong or disturb anybody, but we should not get so obsessed with surgery that it becomes an addiction. I neither support nor condemn cosmetic surgery. Even though we have some beauty clinics here, rich people or celebrities use beauty services in Thailand because of the wider choice and their desire to achieve their idea of perfect beauty. They also want to have access to better quality aesthetic surgery procedures. Importantly, they don’t want to let anybody see that they are beautiful because of the surgeon’s knife. (Peggy, 25, Businesswoman, Vientiane)

In contrast, three middle-class participants with education qualifications and professional careers in Vientiane state their refusal to undergo cosmetic surgery. The participants gave the example of a number of Thai actresses who have altered their appearance to the point that they have become, in the participants’ opinions, unattractive. The participants reject these actresses’ personal styles of beauty related to cosmetic surgery. Although they acknowledge the advantages that can come from beauty transformation by cosmetic surgery, such as enhanced job opportunities, the participants’ increasing attitudes of respect for their own national physical characteristics, combined with their acknowledgement that surgery can ‘go wrong’, leads them

to reject having cosmetic surgery. In a sense, the participants view these Thai actresses' self-transformations as obtained by 'overdoing' plastic surgery.

These three young and successful middle-class participants are proud of the physical traits of their nation, race and ethnic identity, which are overtly contrary to international perceptions of beauty, consisting as they do of small, flattish noses, high cheekbones, and black beady eyes. They conform to the national identity, local femininity and racial inheritance of their ethnicity. A 25 year old accountant from Vientiane explains her resistance to cosmetic surgery in these terms:

It is true that cosmetic surgery can make you more beautiful, and that when you are good-looking, good things tend to come to you. However, I don't like Thai actresses who often change their facial appearance. It can look very ugly if they are addicted to cosmetic surgery, and anyway, I don't want to change the innate appearance that I obtained from my parents and ancestors. (Belle, 25, accountant, Vientiane)

Thirdly, sixteen participants in the countryside desire cosmetic procedures. The participants from the low-income and less-educated groups, across both young people and adults living in Houayxay and Bolikhamsai, would like to undergo cosmetic surgery if they could afford to. Their perceptions of cosmetic surgery are formed by their exposure to actresses in Thai soap operas. In this sense, female Thai protagonists in soaps seem to play a significant role in the participants' attitudes towards seeking enhancements to their physical appearance through cosmetic surgery, should they be in position to be able to afford it. Three street vendors feel dissatisfied with their bodies and are absolutely confident that cosmetic surgery would be successful for them, but they have no concrete plans to engage the surgeons' services because of their lack of financial resources:

I really want to undergo cosmetic surgery if my dream comes true. If I have a chance and I have enough money, I'll definitely have it. I would be like Mai Davika [a Thai actress] in Nang Cha-Da. Is it possible to make me taller? I want to start to change my body first, then my face, my nose and my teeth; then I can be really beautiful. (Klang, 27, vendor, Houayxay)

I like Nang-Ake [a leading female protagonist] who has adorable and cute styles. She inspires me: she's a powerhouse of beauty. I like her personality. I want to be like her, but it is impossible because I was born and grew up in the countryside. Again, it is

impossible for me to undergo cosmetic surgery as she did. She has money, but I don't. (Lar, 21, vendor, Bolikhamsai)

Actresses may undergo various forms of cosmetic surgery, but for me I would get rhinoplasty; I want to do it only once. (Khantali, 31, fruit and vegetable vendor, Houayxay)

It is not only Thai actresses' in Thai TV soap operas that make some participants desire to change their body shapes and lives: Thai reality shows are also a major influence. Data collected from the TV diary recordings revealed that two diarists from Bolikhamsai watched Thai TV reality programmes about body modification, such as *Wow Whanwhan* and *Let Me In: Global Special in Thailand*. They state that they usually watch Thai soap operas and are impressed by Thai actresses' beauty, and they often also watch TV makeover programmes. In this case, exposure to makeover TV shows supports the contention that these young, working-class participants have a strong motivation for body transformation by using cosmetic surgery (see Sharp, Tiggemann and Matiske, 2014, for an earlier study showing similar results for Australian women and Western makeover TV shows).

These Thai TV makeover programmes can influence Lao women's beliefs and habits and can push them towards body-altering surgery in line with the makeover paradigm identified by Rosalind Gill (2007). In this sense, the results indicate that Western makeover culture, as portrayed on Thai TV makeover programmes, is stimulating Lao women's desires to undertake these physical transformations and to acquire more knowledge about the surgery needed to achieve their desired ideal of beauty. Makeover television programmes in Western societies are similarly an important factor in constructing women viewers' desires for facial and body modification (Nabi, 2009).

However, the Lao government's perspectives on Lao women's beauty as a marker of national feminine identity is an obstacle to the cosmetic surgery trends discussed above, and this alternative depiction of the ideal woman is presented in the beauty contest Miss Lao, which is widely broadcast and viewed by Lao women. According to Banet-Weiser (1999), beauty pageants are always regarded as "the construction of feminine identity" (p. 23), so the winner of Miss Lao is meant to represent the perfect image of female beauty in Lao culture.

Sipheng Vongpanya, Director General of the Department of Mass Culture, states that the Miss Lao contest is an event aimed at representing Lao society in terms of gender equality and social roles. Miss Lao also continues to be an embodiment of national beauty, a representation of a

beautiful Lao woman who does not undergo cosmetic surgery and wear revealing clothing (all contestants exhibit themselves wearing traditional national costume, in contrast with most global contests, in which one of the most important elements of the pageant's standard structure is the wearing of bikinis and one-piece swimsuits, Banet-Weiser, 1999). In this context, the regulation about not allowing cosmetic surgery in Miss Lao is a cultural practice militating against the makeover paradigm and is aimed at re-establishing the Lao feminine icon:

We have activities to promote the role and status of women, for example, the Department of Mass Culture on behalf of the Lao government designates the Lao Women's Union to organise Miss Lao, mainly to present traditions and culture. Miss Lao or 'Nang Sao Lao' is a beauty representative for Lao women. She is a metaphorical diplomat used to promulgate the roots of Lao people, traditions, cultures, manners and lifestyles. In the past we were the main organisers of Miss Lao, and we have hosted this event for each of its five years. In the coming year, we are allowing new generations to join the activity, while our department still controls the operation. Nang Sao Lao will be introduced in Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. She will visit the Lao countryside, bringing sport equipment and classroom resources to schools. To qualify for Miss Lao in 2015, we have added a new regulation prohibiting the use of cosmetic surgery before the contest. Importantly in the Miss Lao pageant, from its inception to the present, there has been no wearing of swimsuits. We stick to Lao costumes. (Sipheng Vongpanya, Director General, Department of Mass Culture in the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, interview).

The non-Lao television viewed by Lao women, in particular Thai TV soap operas and makeover shows, filled with Westernised standards of beauty often achieved through cosmetic surgical procedures, are now having to confront the state disapproval of cosmetic surgery in beauty pageants. The state organisations of Miss Lao has introduced this regulation to stabilise a unique Lao feminine identity that includes natural physical beauty and conservative social manners, and that typifies Lao traditions and cultures in which Lao women's bodies should not be over-sexualised. These governmental strategies reflect attempts to control and tightly maintain Lao feminine national identity, and they also shed light on how this particular aspect of the nation (the regulated female body) is meant to look and what it is supposed to stand for.

The current form of the Lao pageant is a hybridisation of a Western genre and its associated cultural practices and indigenous norms in terms of the ideal Lao woman, and therefore Miss Lao's physical appearance, manners and culture are presented in the competition. Arguably, Miss Lao continues to proudly represent Lao female identity, the beauty of Lao feminine bodies,

tradition, and culture. It attempts to combat the image of artificial beauty promoted in messages to Lao women through their media consumption, especially of Thai TV soap operas and makeover shows. In this event, the state is attempting to reconstruct a de-westernisation of standards of beauty and replace it with a pride in Lao ethnicity and nationality.

In accordance with the policy makers' views reflected in interviews, cultural differences from the Western world which saturate Lao society are actually filtered into two policies: firstly, to remove improper Western cultural influences on Lao culture and social norms by the prohibition of cosmetic surgery and wearing swimsuits prior to the country's biggest and most prestigious beauty pageant in order to reconstruct the image of female beauty in Lao culture; secondly, to adapt useful aspects of various foreign cultures to achieve national benefits and cultural security, as shown in the socio-economic national plans.

Despite governmental restrictions on expressions of feminine beauty in the Miss Lao 2015 competition, two years later Lao women's identity was modishly presented in international beauty pageants. Miss Souphaphone Somvichith, a 20 year old catwalk model, was the first representative of Laos to wear a bikini at Miss Universe. For more than a decade, wearing swimsuits and bikinis has been prohibited at Lao beauty pageants, despite the fact that it has become acceptable to wear one in beauty contests in 2017.

7.5 Conclusion

Commodified notions of beauty as depicted in Thai soap operas and makeover programmes offer only an illusion of female empowerment, and merely transform the female subject into passive vessels of consumption. The beauty choices made by the women in my study are influenced by the aspirations of the leading Thai female protagonists and are associated with a popular image of beautiful young women as financially stable, of good character, and as individualistic high-achievers.

The majority (45 out of 53) of women in my study pay attention to physical appearance and cosmetic surgery in order to enhance their beauty, confidence, and agency, features which seem to be influenced largely by their consumption of Thai media, particularly soap operas but also makeover programmes. In addition, many Lao women are proud of their appearance and do not suffer from their dissimilarity to the images portrayed in Thai TV soaps. The changes in women's perceptions of physical beauty which result in the desire for white skin, in body

dissatisfaction and in the use of cosmetic surgery, have become a phenomenon in contemporary Laos. This study has identified five groups of Lao women who have different views on the desire for enhanced beauty and a more 'attractive' appearance.

The first group, young upper-class participants who work in the media industry in Vientiane, are greatly concerned about their body image and change their bodies to fit Western ideals, gender beliefs, social status, identities and cultural norms in line with ideals of modern notions of female beauty. The second group, young middle-class participants in Vientiane, long to have a slender figure, with attractive, fair skin, as inspired by Thai actresses. They are also frequently eager to look Western or international: to be taller, with wide eyes, and a straight nose, for example. However, these young participants have described cosmetic surgery as unacceptable and have given examples of what they consider to be unsuccessful cases of surgery by some Thai actresses. They continue to place more value on the character and morals of women and on traditional Lao femininity rather than surgical beautification.

The third group, low-income young people and adults from the rural areas of Houayxay and Bolikhamsai, have a great desire, triggered by Thai actresses, to achieve their beauty goals in the future, once they have earned enough money. These participants believe in cosmetic enhancements to improve their appearance. The fourth group, rural working-class participants in their early thirties and early forties, have given up on aspirations to become fair-skinned and beautiful as depicted in the media. They understand their figures and beauty as accounted for by 'karma', associated with a previous life. They also believe only the rich are in a position to consider such issues of beautification. The fifth group, elderly, low-income participants from Houayxay and Bolikhamsai, reject a Hollywoodised notion of beauty since they believe in a spiritual beauty that is learnt through their religion. In other words, they deal with the images portrayed in Thai TV soap operas with a degree of equanimity and accept the truth of body uncertainty.

Miss Lao, or Nang Sao Lao, as a cultural event, has been introduced by the Lao government to promote national feminine identity. The regulations prohibiting cosmetic surgery and swimsuits in this contest protect traditional concepts of Lao feminine beauty. The Miss Lao pageant, which is organised by the Lao government, is a vehicle of feminine identity construction, forming new perceptions of beauty as consisting of morality and a strong attachment to ethnicity and national pride. Therefore, cosmetic surgery is deemed not to be a means of becoming a beautiful woman as it is other beauty pageants in Western countries and Thailand. Nevertheless, a hybridised

image of Lao female beauty is first represented in Miss Universe 2017, where the Lao pageant wears a bikini in the competition.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the influence that watching Thai television soap operas has on Lao women as transnational audiences. Through this investigation, this study has examined how Lao women as audiences engage with Thai soap storylines and female characters in their daily media consumption, and the extent to which audiences accept, negotiate, or challenge soap content and modify their own behaviour and aspirations in line with the storylines they consume. It has also investigated the Lao government's attitude to the impact of Thai television soap operas on Lao citizens in their everyday lives, since nation/nationhood is an important cultural signifier that motivates government policy and interconnects with the issue of the hybridisation of Lao women's identities. I have argued that Thai soaps are influential in the lives of some young Lao women, but older women and those in rural areas are influenced to a lesser degree. Young Lao female viewers often maintain a hybrid identity. On the one hand, they accept the narrative of capitalist modernity and consumer culture as a means to aspire to and attain self-satisfaction through the pursuit of fashionable clothes, specific images of beauty and particular lifestyles, and the experiences of 'modern' intimate relationships. Yet, at the same time, they also conform to traditional notions of femininity by wearing traditional dress (Sinh) on religious occasions, being proud of female ethnic Lao beauty, being cautious about expressing sexual feelings, and taking care of parents. I have also argued that the consumption of non-Lao television by Lao audiences, including women's consumption of Thai soap operas, has led to the Lao government expressing concerns about the erosion of traditional culture and putting measures in place to combat this loss.

This work advances debates in the field of women as consumers of cross-border and cross-cultural media, with an explicit focus on Eastern audiences; thus filling a gap in the literature, which mostly focuses on the context of Western television. In my study, for a number of reasons, I drew on research and background literature on women and television. Firstly, a number of studies have posited that soap operas disseminate the values of capitalism and consumerism to modern female viewers (Geraghty, 1991; Hobson, 2003; Iwabuchi, 2002; Spence, 2005; Chua and Iwabuchi, 2008), both in-country and through cross-cultural consumption. For instance, women in the Middle East yearn for the fashionable clothes of female protagonists in Turkish soaps, contrasting with their Muslim identity (Jabbour, 2017). Female youths and adults in China also view the Western lifestyles of female characters in Korean TV series as models to be emulated (Yang, 2012). On the other hand, young women in Malaysia desire cosmopolitan

lifestyles and the representations of female beauty portrayed in Asian soap operas, yet nevertheless still align with traditional cultural norms, showing that women as audiences can reject portrayals of ‘indecorous’ behaviours which run against their conventions (Md Syed, 2013; Md Syde and Runnel, 2014).

Secondly, TV programmes play a major role in altering women’s roles and gender relationships, particularly hierarchical relationships. According to Chen (2015), younger women in China who watch foreign TV series tend to endorse lifestyles such as cohabitation, and equality in relationships, more than do older Chinese women; indicating a weakening of traditional Confucian family values. Research by Yang (2017) confirms that the imported dating programme *Take Me Out* also invites young female Chinese viewers to reject conventional sexual behaviour by portraying premarital sex, cohabitation, and extramarital affairs in less of a negative light than was traditionally the case. Similarly, the Indian soap opera *Sass-Bahu* invites young women in northern India to reappraise women’s traditional roles in the community (Banaji, 2011).

Thirdly, the contents of TV shows have effects on audiences’ changing attitudes towards sexuality. For example, the representation of LGBT characters and queer content in American TV series such as *Orange Is the New Black* (OITNB, 2013–2016) (Symes, 2017) is reflected in a reduction in homophobic attitudes and feelings among American viewers (Gillig *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, the American TV sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* (HIMYM, 2005–2014) presented the issue of abortion; this resulted in enhanced feelings of negativity towards abortion among female viewers (Swigger, 2016). The research about gender and sexuality is applicable to this study in terms of the positive reception of the LGBT characters portrayed in Thai soaps.

Finally, many studies have shown that reality TV programmes impact women’s desires, aspirations, and interpretations of ideals of beauty (Grabe *et al.*, 2008; Hardit and Hanum, 2012). American TV lifestyle and competition shows, for instance, produce an increase in women’s concerns about their bodies and contribute to their desire to have slender figures (English, 2014). American TV series such as *Cougar Town* and *Desperate Housewives* also portray female characters in their forties with the appearance and shapes of younger women (Hefner *et al.*, 2014). In this study, female young Lao viewers from different socioeconomic backgrounds living in the capital city, Vientiane – as well as in Houayxay and Bolikhamsai – all negotiate and accept the soaps’ messages in relation to consumerism, modern relationships, and beauty ideals. However, the present findings from the older working-class women living in rural Lao

show a rejection of the portrayals of extravagant lifestyles, which differs from the research of beauty ideals in the Western context.

A review of the relevant literature reveals a paucity of studies which have investigated the influence of Lao citizens' cross-cultural viewing of media from neighbouring countries such as Thailand. As Evans (1998) has stated, 'Most Lao watch Thai television, which clearly has had a very important impact on young people, but the complex nature of this influence remains to be investigated' (p. 21).

8.1 Contributions of this research

This thesis makes an original contribution to scholarship in a number of ways. In general terms, it expands our knowledge in relation to the exercise of women's agency through the lens of TV soap opera viewing, enriching our understanding of the gender-media relationship as it operates in the specific regional context of Laos. It also provides a nuanced account of effect, showing how TV consumption works to empower women through providing relatable storylines on alternative lifestyles and the possibilities for change, as well as reinforcing stereotypes of appropriate female behaviour. As part of this general point, the findings also show that audience aspirations are not confined to coveting material goods; they also include less tangible but important elements such as education and improved status and opportunities as women. This highlights the importance of context when considering women audiences and demonstrates how women reconcile living in a traditional and patriarchal society such as Laos with the experience of a more progressive lifestyle, through the adoption of a hybrid self-identity. This challenges Giddens' (1991) notion that increasing individualisation necessarily leads to a process of detraditionalisation. Importantly, the findings corroborate much of the work undertaken with Western women audiences, which has shown that demographic characteristics such as educational level, income, and geography are important factors in determining media effects. The thesis also developed the concept of 'Thailandisation' as a useful way to consider the consumption of cross-cultural media from a near neighbour (in this case, Thai soaps by a Lao audience), suggesting that the influence is not entirely or singularly 'Western' but rather just as much the conduit of consumerism and capitalism from an 'Eastern' country (Thailand). This necessitates the articulation of a different conceptualisation of this phenomenon to account for the particular forms that such near-neighbour influences exert.

8.2 Theoretical contributions

Certain theoretical frameworks were drawn upon to pull the analysis together and to integrate the data on Lao women's agency, self-satisfaction, and social aspirations through the lens of Thai soap opera viewing. This study proposed hybridisation to advance the concepts of individualisation/detraditionalisation. According to Giddens (1991, 1992), women's increasing individualisation usually corresponds with the detraditionalisation of society. Yet, in contrast, this research has argued that enhanced female autonomy and agency in Laos is not necessarily coming at the expense of the nation's traditional equilibrium. In the current study, the increasing individualisation of women is not leading to an erosion of the collectivism which embodies traditional family life. Cultural hybridity attaches to religious beliefs and traditional notions of morality to help Lao women negotiate and balance their life choices, individual rights, and family obligations. Young upper- and middle-class Lao women in their twenties and thirties in Vientiane, enjoying greater educational and career choices, can be said to represent a process of individualisation; enabling them to choose when to marry, whom to marry, and when, if they deem it necessary, to end relationships by separation and divorce. At the same time, family bonds still play a role in helping young pregnant women to decide against termination of a pregnancy. Some young women in this study who experienced teenage pregnancies were able to continue their studies and live with family support. After giving birth, their parents helped to take care of the baby, giving the teenage mother a chance to study. On the other hand, some young women with educational qualifications and careers in Vientiane, along with many less educated middle-aged and elderly Lao working-class women in Houayxay and Bolikhamsai, agree with and conform to traditional Lao values of femininity: monogamous relationships, not engaging in sexually explicit behaviour, and expressing their gratitude. In addition, they maintain the national dress by wearing Lao Sinh and are also proud of authentic Lao beauty. Therefore, in contemporary Laos, women choose to experience the spirit of individualism, changing femininities and enjoying more liberated lives while at the same time remaining committed to traditional notions of a 'virtuous woman' – a 'good' daughter, mother, and wife according to Lao traditions. In this way, Lao women who maintain the values of femininity strengthen nationhood and nationalism in Laos.

8.3 Summary of research findings

Whilst I have already articulated the key contributions which I believe this work makes to knowledge, it is useful to return to the original research questions and consider the ways in which the thesis has answered them. I employed questionnaires (185 participants), TV diaries (15), and focus groups (53) to investigate Lao women's developing agency and changing identity through the lens of their viewing and interpretation of Thai television soap operas.

The primary research question was: What pleasures do Lao women derive from watching Thai soap operas? This question was divided into three sub-themes related to female Lao viewers of Thai soap operas:

- 1) How do viewers negotiate Thai soap content when storylines often contravene traditional Lao values and cultural traditions?
- 2) To what extent do viewers aspire to or reject the consumerism they see in programme content?
- 3) How (if at all) do viewers relate to storylines which portray 'modern' sexual behaviours, fashions, and lifestyles?

My secondary research question was: How are the Lao government's attitude to the impact of Thai television soap operas on Lao citizens in their everyday lives? To answer this question, I employed in-depth 'elite' interviews with seven Lao politicians as representatives of Lao policymakers.

8.3.1 *Patterns of TV consumption viewed as a symbol of Thailandisation*

Thai TV soap operas on different channels dominate the market of Lao entertainment media. Lao women have been watching Thai TV for nearly three decades. The popularity of Thai soaps partly derives from two factors. Firstly, Lao TV has a limited budget and is consequently unable to produce the types of expensive, glossy programmes that are made in Thailand; secondly, unlike Lao TV programmes, Thai soap opera content is not controlled by the government. Lao female viewers of various ages across a variety of occupations, social classes, and levels of education, living in three regional areas of Laos – Vientiane, Houayxay, and Bolikhamsai – thus habitually watch Thai television programmes, particularly soap operas. Their main reasons for watching Thai soaps include the interesting and varied storylines, the beautiful actresses,

linguistic familiarity, and the ease of access to programmes through satellite television. The majority of these viewers like to watch Thai television with their families for two to three hours every day and mostly watch an average of ten different soap operas per year. Thai soaps include storylines about love relationships, sexual intimacy, sexual assault, teenagers and social problems, and politics and power, subjects virtually absent from the Lao media; and female protagonists' designer clothes, portrayals of modern femininity, and contemporary gender roles portrayed in Thai soap operas raise awareness of these issues among Lao female viewers. Therefore, Thai television soap operas are very influential in Lao family life and society. In addition, online TV, mobile TV, and YouTube have become available as channels for Lao teenagers and young adults in Vientiane and urban areas to follow Thai TV soap operas, news, other TV shows, advertisements, music, and films. The term 'Thailandisation', as noted, was developed to explain this exposure to transnational television viewing and media in the everyday lives of Lao women. This term has significant explanatory power in accounting for the extent to which Lao women are attracted to Thai television, and the potential this attraction has to transform Lao women's aspirations, lifestyles, and patterns of behaviour. This term also enjoys an advantage as a conceptual tool in the way it balances the conceptual defects associated with 'Westernisation' and the contraflows of the major Western entertainment media.

8.3.2 TV influences and the desire for brand names, fashion, and beauty

Lao women's individual well-being and quality of life, as shown through aspirations for and satisfaction with luxury brand names and Western notions of beauty, can be understood as using their capacity to exercise agency in the sense that Thai TV soap operas' representations of consumerism, female characters, Thai actresses, and celebrities' bodies appear to encourage and reinforce Lao women's aspirations to be financially independent so as to purchase womenswear brands and designer-label clothes and accessories. Lao women also aspire to improve their physical appearance, associating beauty with pale skin, a slender body shape, and cosmetic surgery. Their scope for educational and career attainment reflects their effective choices of modern lifestyles. Greater personal autonomy and more liberated lifestyles are increasingly attainable for younger, educated Lao women from the upper- and middle-class group in Vientiane. They have gained financial independence and, as a result, have enhanced opportunities to possess luxury items and to access beauty products and services. These women can afford body transformation procedures to boost their confidence and to upgrade their social status. Less educated youths and teenage working-class female viewers in Houayxay and Bolikhamsai similarly aspire to possess expensive designer products and accessories. They also

have strong desires to achieve the kind of beauty portrayed by Thai actresses and the leading protagonists in the soap operas. Their financial circumstances, however, constrain their agency in this regard.

Conversely, some groups of Lao women are less enamoured by what they see in Thai soap operas. Some young middle-class participants reject the depicted ideals of beauty and cosmetic surgery procedures, instead opting to take pride in their national identity and in traditional ideals of national beauty. Similarly, the middle-aged and elderly viewers who did not receive much formal schooling object to the extravagance portrayed in Thai soaps and opt instead for simple lifestyles. These women are satisfied with their limited material assets. In addition, some rural working-class women aged between 30 and 40 reject the idea of becoming fair-skinned. They believe that 'karma' defines a person's appearance, race, and ethnicity. Finally, rural elderly low-income female viewers object to beauty ideals of skin tone and body size, placing more value on human and inner beauty. Their ages and their humble and unprivileged working-class backgrounds in rural areas of Laos are causing them to reject the idea of being active consumers, although they like watching Thai soap operas.

8.3.3 Women's attitudes to TV soap narratives about lifestyles and sexual behaviours

The independent female characters portrayed in the love storylines of Thai soap operas inspire young Lao female viewers to make decisions about family formation, their personal lives, and their romantic relationships. Choosing to pursue career advancement, young, educated upper- and middle-class Lao women in Vientiane and Houayxay are today less likely to live with their parents and elderly relatives. Nevertheless, although they decide to live alone or in smaller family units, they still maintain strong relationships with members of their wider families. They also reject a rigidly patriarchal family: they believe in equal relationships and regard cohabitation as an ordinary step for couples to learn their partners' habits prior to marriage. In addition, these participants accept the lifestyles of the LGBT characters featured in Thai soaps. They concur that gender inequality and discrimination based on sexual preference is wrong, even though the subject remains taboo in the Lao media. On the other hand, young, less well-off working-class women living in rural Bolikhamsai do not enjoy the benefits of a prolonged education as they are forced by economic circumstances to terminate their schooling to support their families. Nevertheless, they accept the portrayals of independent female characters and aspire to the same careers and learning opportunities to enhance their well-being. In rural areas such as Bolikhamsai, this study found that the traditional values of femininity and families'

preference for sons shape young women's individual agency. LGBT lifestyles are also less likely to be considered acceptable here, with traditional concepts of fixed genders – male and female – deemed the norm. This seems to confirm that a good education eventually drives women's attainment of equal rights and economic autonomy in patriarchal societies such as Laos.

Middle-aged women who have lower incomes and fewer personal assets – in both urban and rural areas – disagree with 'modern' sexual trends such as cohabiting couples and abortions. Nevertheless, they are more likely to be patient and forgiving of their husbands for adultery, implying that they accept the conventional archetypes of the patriarchy. These older women seem to maintain traditional duties as caretakers. They have many roles to play: housework; taking care of the children, their husbands, and parents; and working at their own low-paid jobs. Faced with these real-life pressures, they view favourably the kind of strong, confident, self-assured, and disobedient characters portrayed by leading Thai female soap protagonists, because these characters face up to and deal with the difficulties they experience in their daily lives. Some middle-aged Lao women with financial constraints may experience domestic violence on the basis of control and a widespread mood of anger, since women's agency is limited by masculine gender roles in a patriarchal society. For example, many husbands and male partners in Laos are viewed as strong and powerful leaders of the family, whereas some less educated, passive and dependent Lao women, particularly in rural areas, are unable to perform violent resistance. A small group of them who are mothers are also against same-sex relationships because of their belief in traditional values of masculinity and femininity. Similarly, the working-class women around the age of 50–53 who attended primary school in Houayxay and Bolikhamsai still conform to the traditional values of femininity and the 'Cultural Family' policy introduced by the Lao government as a form of collectivism in relation to an extended, harmonious and helpful family. These women have limited choices in their personal lives and relationships. They are representatives of the traditional depiction of a virtuous woman: the dutiful, obedient, and humble wife. These older women believe that a relationship should not be consummated before marriage and that separation/divorce should be avoided at all costs, whereas husbands committing adultery should be forgiven.

8.3.4 Governmental efforts to preserve cultural traditions

It can be seen that cultural preservation in relation to changing femininities was considered necessary by the Lao government for what they perceive to be national and cultural stability.

Cultural policymaking, viewed as a process of nation-building, is continually employed to maintain traditional culture in an ever-globalising world and to protect against the influences of Western values and cultural imperialism, which permeate through, for example, Lao citizens' consumption of transnational television, especially Thai soap operas. The first cultural preservation campaign, for Lao traditional dress (the Sinh or sarong), applies to Lao women's daily lives. The promotion of the Sinh has resulted in it becoming compulsory for all girls as a school uniform from primary school to university, and also becoming a uniform for female governmental officers in every ministry and governmental organisation. Moreover, the Lao government regularly monitors and bans revealing clothes; nude images and naked women in particular are prohibited in Lao society. The second cultural campaign, 'Cultural Family', is a part of a national policy, begun in 2014, to reiterate the role of the family and the duties of citizens. For example, every Lao family and each Lao citizen should earn a living, have a positive attitude towards Lao traditions and customs, raise children to be good people who feel deep gratitude towards their parents and the elderly, and maintain a harmonious and helpful family. The third way in which traditional Lao culture is preserved is through the raising of public awareness of Lao women's beauty. The government regards Lao women's beauty as a symbol of national feminine identity; this is reflected through beauty pageants, such as Miss Lao 2015. As has been illustrated, in the competition Lao female contestants were not allowed to undergo any cosmetic surgery or wear a swimming costume. The regulations were a marker of Lao cultural practices aimed at reconstructing a certain concept of national beauty and a unique feminine identity for young Lao women.

8.4 Research limitations

As a Thai PhD student, it is important to note that my international fieldwork in Laos was hindered by the Lao government, a one-party socialist republic. Any research project that receives permission from the government still needs to collect the data in a prescribed place and with the people they provide. The time duration for receiving permission to conduct research in Laos is approximately six months to two years; the researcher must wait patiently and may be refused permission. Regarding this governmental protocol of Laos, I had the cooperation of Laotians and relevant people to make this study a success. Firstly, a Lao public servant whom I already knew helped me to gain permission to conduct the research project and to interview the politicians from the Lao Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism. Secondly, I visited and reported myself to the Thai Royal Embassy in Vientiane for guidance and advice. Hence, I finally had the chance to collect data in three regional areas of Laos:

Vientiane, the capital city of Laos; Houayxay city, Bokeo province, in the north of Laos; and Pakxan city, in the province of Bolikhamsai in western Laos. However, I still experienced difficulties in giving questionnaires to the public since Laos generally prohibits surveys of people's opinions, particularly in Vientiane.

This research project was not able to explore all parts of Laos because of the ethnic and cultural diversity of the country. This study focused on the group of Laotians called Lao Loum (Lowland people) who make up 60 per cent of the nation's population. Other ethnic groups include Lao Theung (Midland people) in the central and southern mountains (30 per cent of the total), who are Mon-Khmer tribes; and Lao Soung or Hill people, minority cultures of Laos such as the Hmong, Yao (Mien), Dao, and Shan living in highland areas (10 per cent). These groups did not take part in the research. Since Lao Theung and Lao Soung speak ethnic minority languages, only a small proportion of these groups speak Lao. Due to this obstacle, this study does not show women's agency, identity, self-satisfaction, and social aspiration among Lao ethnic minorities.

8.5 Ideas for future research

Thai television programmes are influential in shaping Lao people's everyday lives, something which the Lao government realises and is concerned about, particularly with regard to those programmes that show what are deemed to be inappropriate foreign values which weaken traditional Lao culture. During the interviews with Lao politicians about cultural preservation, this study also found that the Lao government is planning to build a media centre for national content providers, thus enabling it to censor unsuitable content (the main weakness in this project is the budget needed to set up the centre). It is expected that China (Laos's main political and economic ally) will provide most of the support to the Lao state in this respect, as the two governments share the same political system and concerns about foreign undermining of traditional values. Additionally, the first 'Lao Sat-I' satellite was built and financed by China to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of Laos (Ku, 2015).

At present, Laotians need a cable box to receive TV programmes from China with both Lao subtitles and dubbed voices, as I saw in the office of Mr Inpone Nakhonsy (the Deputy Director General of the Mass Media Department). He stated that the cable company is carrying out experiments to test the effectiveness of the signal. It is implied that if the cable boxes are sent to every home, Thai television signals will be blocked. This would constitute a dramatic change

for Lao television, Lao media policymaking, and the relationship between Laos and Thailand. It would pave the way for further investigation on how Lao audiences might react to the political and cultural changes to their daily media consumption. In addition, I suggest that a potential future area of research could be the prospects for success of such governmental attempts to restrict access to Thai media, referring to this as ‘policy implications’. In today’s globalising world, when Laos seeks to restrict access to outside media at a time when it also seeks to liberalise and open its economy, to what extent will this dual strategy be possible in the long term?

Furthermore, this research provided insights into women’s changing attitudes towards same-sex relationships. The emerging and relative (compared to the past) openness of the LGBT community in Laos likely reflects the growing flexibility of choices in the country, and the LGBT participants in this study have inspired me to further examine this issue. Upper- and middle-class LGBTs in Laos may benefit from the growing acceptance of LGBT lifestyles as these people are at the vanguard of economic reforms in Laos and therefore wish to be well-regarded by wider society. One of the most interesting aspects of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender relationships and lifestyles is the achievement of an egalitarian relationship; ideas that were previously examined in a Western context by Dunne (1997) and Weeks *et al.* (1999, 2001). However, given the traditional concept of hegemonic masculinity and the current socio-political values of Laos, LGBT culture – hitherto not at all investigated in Laos - would be a challenging area to explore in future research.

Appendices

Appendix A the paper questionnaire

This research is conducted under the auspices of Newcastle University, United Kingdom. This research instrument has been presented to the University's Ethics committee and was approved on 11 February, 2015. The following questionnaire was designed to explore Thai television consumption by Lao women in order to understand how Thai cross-cultural and cross-border television, in particular soap operas, are consumed in Laos.

This questionnaire has been divided into two sections:

Section 1 relates to TV exposure and TV viewing behaviours

Section 2 relates to personal details

In both sections I would like you to tick the answer that corresponds to your preferences and TV watching habits in everyday life and to rate your overall opinion of TV programmes, and then I would like you to explain a little bit about what you like most about Thai TV.

The questionnaire should not take more than 15 minutes to complete. All information supplied by respondents will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Your views will only be reported in summary. The data will be stored securely until the research project has been completed, at which point the questionnaires will be shredded and the computer files deleted. You can withdraw and stop the questionnaire at any time.

Thank you very much for your assistance in this research. Please return your completed questionnaire to the researcher.

Miss Mesirin Kwanjai

PhD student, media and cultural studies

School of Art and Cultures, Newcastle University

Email: m.kwanjai@ncl.ac.uk

Questionnaire “TV consumption of Lao women”

Section 1: TV Exposure and Behaviour

(Tick or highlight the chosen option)

1. Select the type of TV service that you have:

- Television (free TV)
- Cable
- Satellite
- TV online (specify)

2. How much US television do you watch each day?

- Less an hour
- 2-3 hours
- 3-4 hours
- 4-6 hours
- more 6 hours

3. What time do you usually watch TV programmes?

- 05.00-9.00
- 10.00-13.00
- 14.00-17.00
- 18.00 – 22.00
- 23.00-01.00

4. Who do you usually watch TV programmes with?

- family
- friends
- alone

5. Where do you usually watch TV programmes?

- living room
- bedroom
- dining room
- other (specify)

6. What are your favourite TV programmes?

I am interested in drama/soap opera/series programmes

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

I am interested in news programmes

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

I am interested in game show programmes

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

I am interested in variety show programmes

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

I am interested in reality show programmes

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

I am interested in music programmes

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

I am interested in sport programmes

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

I am interested in cooking programmes

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

I am interested in documentary programmes

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

7. Have you recently watched Thai TV programmes?

- Yes, I have (answer “yes” please do number 9)
- No, I haven’t (answer “no” please do number 8)

8. Why do you not choose to watch Thai TV programmes?

- I prefer Laos TV programmes
- I prefer American/ Korean / Japanese programmes
- I cannot access Thai TV signal
- I have no time/ must study or work
- I have other reasons (please specify)

9. Is it easy or difficult to access Thai TV?

- Easy Difficult

10. How do you access to these Thai TV programmes?

- Satellite TV Personal computer Smart phone
- Tablet/iPad Internet/website (specify)

11. How much Thai television do you watch each day?

- Less an hour 2-3 hours 3-4 hours
 4-6 hours more 6 hours

12. How much you like Thai soap operas?

○ ———— ○ ———— ○ ———— ○ ———— ○
Strongly enjoy Like neither like nor dislike Displeasure Strongly dislike

13. What do you like most in Thai soap operas?

- Actor and Actress Story
 Settings and Locations Songs or sound tracks
 Production (camera shooting/lighting/editing/costume, etc.)
 Other (specify)

14. Which of the following sentences best describes your opinion of Thai soap operas on TV?

- Thai soap operas entertain me
 Thai soap operas can disclose the unexpected images and
Ideas that are hard to find in Laos TV programmes
 Both

15. Please specify how interested you are in the genre of Thai TV drama / soap opera

I am interested in romantic comedy dramas

○ ———— ○ ———— ○ ———— ○ ———— ○
Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

I am interested in action dramas

○ ———— ○ ———— ○ ———— ○ ———— ○
Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

I am interested in period/history dramas

○ ———— ○ ———— ○ ———— ○ ———— ○
Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

I am interested in horror dramas

○ ———— ○ ———— ○ ———— ○ ———— ○
Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

16. Which Thai TV programmes are you watching now? (Please specify)

17. Which one of Thai soap operas have you watched?

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> SUSAN KHON PEN | <input type="checkbox"/> SAAI SEE PLOENG |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SAMEE TEE TRA | <input type="checkbox"/> PRAO |
| <input type="checkbox"/> KHOM PHAYABAT | <input type="checkbox"/> RAK KHUN THAO CHANG |
| <input type="checkbox"/> RAK TONG AUM | <input type="checkbox"/> JAO SAO SALATAN |
| <input type="checkbox"/> YAH LUEM CHAN | <input type="checkbox"/> PROM DAEN HUAJAI |
| <input type="checkbox"/> LEH NANG HONG | <input type="checkbox"/> LAH RAK SUD KHOB FAH |
| <input type="checkbox"/> PHAYU THEWADA | <input type="checkbox"/> SANEHA SANYA KHAEN |
| <input type="checkbox"/> NET NAKHARACH | <input type="checkbox"/> KHAENG RAK NAK ZING |
| <input type="checkbox"/> RAK ORK RIT | <input type="checkbox"/> LOOK PHUCHAI PHAN DEE |
| <input type="checkbox"/> WIMAN MAPHRAO | <input type="checkbox"/> PHLENG RAK PHA PUEN TAEK |
| <input type="checkbox"/> LOOK TAS | <input type="checkbox"/> LOOK PHUCHAI HUAJAI KHEM |
| <input type="checkbox"/> HANG KRUENG | <input type="checkbox"/> KULAP RAI KHONG NAI TAWAN |
| <input type="checkbox"/> NAI SUAN KWAN | <input type="checkbox"/> WE-RA-BU-RUD KONG KA-YA |
| <input type="checkbox"/> NGAO | <input type="checkbox"/> CUBIC NHEE HUAJAI |
| <input type="checkbox"/> MADAM DAN | <input type="checkbox"/> KHUE HATTHA KRONG PI POB |
| <input type="checkbox"/> MAEM JA | <input type="checkbox"/> SAPHAI HUA DAENG |
| <input type="checkbox"/> PHOB RAK | <input type="checkbox"/> PLOENG CHIM PLEE |
| <input type="checkbox"/> POH KAI JAE | <input type="checkbox"/> WAI MAN PHAN ASOON |
| <input type="checkbox"/> FAI NAI WAYU | <input type="checkbox"/> NHEE KOR LAH ZA KOR RAK |
| <input type="checkbox"/> RUEAN RITSAYA | <input type="checkbox"/> KOH 8TALUI DAEN MAHATSAJAN |
| <input type="checkbox"/> KULAP LEN FAI | <input type="checkbox"/> PEEK MONGKUT |
| <input type="checkbox"/> HUAJAI THUEAN | <input type="checkbox"/> KEETA LOKA |
| <input type="checkbox"/> WIANG ROI DAO | <input type="checkbox"/> MAE KHUN AOEI |
| <input type="checkbox"/> MALEE ROENG RABAM | <input type="checkbox"/> RAAI RAK PAYAK KUNGFU |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ROI FAN TAWAN DUEAD | <input type="checkbox"/> RARK BOON |

18. Why do you watch Thai TV programmes? (Please specify)

Section 2: Demographical data

(Tick or highlight the chosen option)

19. Age

- 18-30 years 31-40 years 41-50 years over 50

20. Education

- Elementary school High school
 Vocational Certificate Non-Formal education
 Technical College Polytechnic school
 Bachelor's degree Higher than Bachelor's degree

22. Occupation

- Student Entrepreneur Employee
 Governmental official Vendor Housewife
 Agriculturist Other (specify)

Would you allow me to contact you by telephone and email to learn more about your use of television, in particular Thai TV soap opera viewing?

Yes No

Personal Information:

Name and Surname

City of residence

State

Telephone number

Email address

Age

Occupation/job

Appendix B a blank copy of a diary template

Thai soap operas Diary

This TV diary form is a part of the research project titled “*Women Watching TV: The Influence of Thai soap operas on female Lao viewers*”. The study’s aim is to explore Thai soap opera viewing of Lao women and their perceptions. All data will be solely employed in academia. All participants are anonymous diarists.

Instructions

- 1) Please record this TV Diary as precisely as you can after watching television daily for two weeks.
- 2) Please record everything in pen with clear understandable handwriting.
- 3) Please keep this TV Diary undamaged and the researcher will collect the TV Diary at your home as the appointed time and date of the researcher and the diarist.
- 4) If you have any queries about your diary record, the researcher is willing to answer them. Please feel free to contact me by email at m.kwanjai@ncl.ac.uk, or by mobile phone: (865) 2028459895.

The diarist’s personal information

| | |
|---------------|------------------|
| Name | Surname |
| Age | Occupation |
| Email Address | Telephone number |

Week 1 (dd/mm/yy – dd/mm/yy)

1. Please fill in the table below as follows:

| Day | Did you watch Thai TV today? (Yes or No) | How many hours? | How did you access to watch Thai TV? |
|------------------|---|------------------------|---|
| Monday | | | |
| Tuesday | | | |
| Wednesday | | | |
| Thursday | | | |
| Friday | | | |
| Saturday | | | |
| Sunday | | | |

2. Please fill in the table below as follows:

| Day | Did you watch Thai soap operas today? (Yes or No) | Title | Time |
|------------------|--|--------------|-------------|
| Monday | | | |
| Tuesday | | | |
| Wednesday | | | |
| Thursday | | | |
| Friday | | | |
| Saturday | | | |
| Sunday | | | |

3. How much did you enjoy your Thai TV soap opera today?

| Day | Your answer |
|------------------|--------------------|
| Monday | |
| Tuesday | |
| Wednesday | |
| Thursday | |
| Friday | |
| Saturday | |
| Sunday | |

4. What was the most memorable or interesting scene in the soap operas you watched today?

| Day | Your answer |
|------------------|--------------------|
| Monday | |
| Tuesday | |
| Wednesday | |
| Thursday | |
| Friday | |
| Saturday | |
| Sunday | |

5. What was the thing that you disliked or did not understand in the soap operas today?

| Day | Your answer |
|------------------|--------------------|
| Monday | |
| Tuesday | |
| Wednesday | |
| Thursday | |
| Friday | |
| Saturday | |
| Sunday | |

Appendix C: Question guide of focus groups

A. Introductory questions:

- 1) Do you watch a lot of Thai soap operas?
- 2) For how long have you been watching them?
- 3) When did you start watching them?
- 4) What do you like most in Thai soap operas?
- 5) Why do you keep watching Thai soap operas?

B. Questions about the influence of soap operas

After watching Thai soap operas, do you feel you should:

- 1) try to look like the characters on TV?
- 2) wear similar clothes or have the same hairstyle/make up?
- 3) buy similar items like those shown on the show in the same way? (Can you give some examples?)
- 4) Do you think that Thai soap opera actresses look different from ordinary people? (Think about the colour of their skin, oval face with big eyes, thicker eyebrows etc.)
- 5) Do you think these features are attractive? Why? Do you ever compare yourself to these actresses?
- 6) Do you think the characters in soap operas are role models you should emulate? Which would be the examples of behaviour you think are positive and you would like to follow yourself?
- 7) Are some of the characters occupations or educational background appealing to you? (Which ones and why?)
- 8) What do you think about the lifestyles depicted in the soap operas? Would any of those lifestyles be attractive to you? (Which ones and why?)
- 9) What do you think about the relationships depicted in these soap operas?
- 10) Do you think that the family relations portrayed in these soap operas are similar or different to yours? (Think about the relationships in the family, between parents and children, between young and old, the 'purity' of women and the importance of virginity).
- 11) How about divorce and single parenting?) What do you think about the transsexual, gay and lesbian characters that you see in the soap operas?

- 12) What do you think about the moral and religious values depicted in Thai soap operas? (Think about respect for the elderly or politeness, religious observance and rituals – Buddhism, making merits, Karma, the Five Precepts)
- 13) Do you think that the way these are represented in Thai soap operas have a positive impact on you? (Can you give an example?)
- 14) Do you think that any aspect of your life or your belief has changed because you were watching Thai soap operas? (Can you give an example?)
- 15) Do you think that Thai soap operas have a good or a bad influence on people who watch them?
- 16) What are the main differences between the life depicted in Thai soap operas and your life?
- 17) What are the aspects of Thai soap operas that you don't like? Why?

Appendix D the participants' information

| Pseudonym | Age | Education | Occupation | Living areas | Focus Groups Date |
|------------------|------------|-------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Yam | 22 | High school | Employee | Houayxay | 08/05/2015 |
| Ya | 32 | High school | Employee | Houayxay | 08/05/2015 |
| Kanthali | 31 | High school | Fruit and vegetable vendor | Houayxay | 08/05/2015 |
| Pad | 28 | Bachelor's degree | Teacher | Houayxay | 08/05/2015 |
| Buakham | 34 | Grade 9 | Vendor | Houayxay | 08/05/2015 |
| Somjit | 52 | Primary school | Farmer and Housewife | Houayxay | 08/05/2015 |
| Tuk | 42 | Primary school | Housewife | Houayxay | 08/05/2015 |
| Somporn | 51 | Primary school | Farmer | Houayxay | 09/05/2015 |
| Klang | 27 | Grade 9 | Vendor | Houayxay | 09/05/2015 |
| Kan | 25 | High school | Employee | Houayxay | 09/05/2015 |
| Muan | 32 | Bachelor's degree | Merchant | Houayxay | 09/05/2015 |
| Tong-Mun | 38 | Primary school | Vendor | Houayxay | 09/05/2015 |
| Ting | 26 | Bachelor's degree | Master's student | Houayxay | 09/05/2015 |
| Bua-sorn | 51 | Primary school | Housewife | Houayxay | 09/05/2015 |
| Laddawan | 31 | Master's degree | Teacher | Vientiane | 23/04/2015 |

| | | | | | |
|----------|----|-------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Ki | 31 | Master's degree | Governmental officer | Vientiane | 23/04/2015 |
| Nat | 32 | Bachelor's degree | Governmental officer | Vientiane | 23/04/2015 |
| Annita | 25 | Bachelor's degree | Singer and jewellery business owner | Vientiane | 23/04/2015 |
| Lingling | 23 | Bachelor's degree | Model and actress | Vientiane | 23/04/2015 |
| Nook | 27 | Bachelor's degree | Accountant | Vientiane | 23/04/2015 |
| Kratai | 25 | Bachelor's degree | Lawyer | Vientiane | 23/04/2015 |
| Parn | 26 | Bachelor's degree | Teacher | Vientiane | 23/04/2015 |
| Pla | 25 | Bachelor's degree | Secretary | Vientiane | 15/05/2015 |
| Prang | 19 | College | Student | Vientiane | 15/05/2015 |
| Took | 32 | Bachelor's degree | Teacher | Vientiane | 15/05/2015 |
| Ple | 32 | Bachelor's degree | Businesswoman | Vientiane | 15/05/2015 |
| Noi | 26 | Bachelor's degree | Accountant | Vientiane | 15/05/2015 |
| Nan | 23 | Bachelor's degree | Product promoter | Vientiane | 15/05/2015 |
| Von | 26 | High school | Salesclerk at - jewellery shop | Vientiane | 15/05/2015 |
| Kuk | 26 | Bachelor's degree | Master's student | Vientiane | 15/05/2015 |
| Pattama | 29 | Bachelor's degree | Singer | Vientiane | 26/05/2015 |

| | | | | | |
|---------|----|-------------------|---------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Barbie | 23 | Bachelor's degree | Actress, singer, model | Vientiane | 26/05/2015 |
| Keaw | 21 | College | Student | Vientiane | 26/05/2015 |
| Lilly | 23 | College | Model | Vientiane | 26/05/2015 |
| Peggy | 25 | Bachelor's degree | Businesswoman | Vientiane | 26/05/2015 |
| Belle | 25 | Bachelor's degree | Account | Vientiane | 26/05/2015 |
| Ning | 46 | Master's degree | Teacher | Vientiane | 26/05/2015 |
| Roza | 22 | College | Student | Vientiane | 26/05/2015 |
| Kade | 32 | High school | Clothes shop owner | Bolikhamsai | 4/04/2015 |
| Sa | 21 | Grade 9 | Restaurant employee | Bolikhamsai | 4/04/2015 |
| Kate | 18 | Grade 9 | Restaurant employee | Bolikhamsai | 4/04/2015 |
| Bee | 25 | Grade 9 | Restaurant employee | Bolikhamsai | 4/04/2015 |
| Neung | 41 | Grade 9 | Merchant | Bolikhamsai | 4/04/2015 |
| Ban-Yen | 45 | Primary school | Employee | Bolikhamsai | 4/04/2015 |
| Petch | 25 | Grade 9 | Lottery seller | Bolikhamsai | 4/04/2015 |
| Fah | 22 | High School | Merchant | Bolikhamsai | 4/04/2015 |
| Fon | 18 | Grade 9 | Farmer and bar hostess | Bolikhamsai | 4/04/2015 |

| | | | | | |
|------|----|----------|---------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| Da | 19 | Grade 10 | Farmer and bar hostess | Bolikhamsai | 4/04/2015 |
| New | 20 | Grade 10 | Farmer and bar hostess | Bolikhamsai | 4/04/2015 |
| Lar | 21 | Grade 9 | Vendor | Bolikhamsai | 4/04/2015 |
| Kade | 20 | Grade 9 | Farmer and waitress | Bolikhamsai | 4/04/2015 |
| Gift | 22 | Grade 9 | Employee | Bolikhamsai | 4/04/2015 |
| Pook | 23 | Grade 10 | Dancer | Bolikhamsai | 4/04/2015 |

Appendix E Examples of interview questions

1. Questions for politicians from the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism

- 1) To what extent does Thai media play a role in the life of Lao people?
- 2) How important do you think it is?
- 3) As we know, Lao people usually watch Thai TV and they like Thai stars in Thai soap operas. How does the Ministry consider this issue?
- 4) One of the missions of the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism would be to support Lao people to watch more Laos TV. How do you think this can be achieved?
- 5) How can Lao TV programmes distribute Lao culture and traditions to the people of the country?
- 6) The emergence of the Internet in Laos makes it easier for Lao people to access numerous sources of news and information from Thailand and other countries around the world. Do you think there could be some content that influences in a negative manner the stability of the national and cultural identity of the people?
- 7) What are the defensive measures or the concrete policies that can be used to preserve Lao culture from the influence of transnational media like Thai television?
- 8) What are the main aspects of Laos' culture that embodies the country's national identity?
- 9) What do you think about the external factors that impact on the preservation national culture? Is Thai media such a factor?
- 10) What are the policies that protect the culture and national identity of Laos in terms of action plans at the present and what future actions are planned?

2. Additional questions to be used with Lao academics only

- 1) What are the regulations and policies from the government that maintain Lao culture and national identity?
- 2) What are the reactions of Lao citizens towards these rules and policies?

Appendix F Research project information sheet

Project Title: Women Watching TV: The Influence of Thai soap operas on Lao female viewers

Researcher: Mesirin Kwanjai

Researcher's contact details: m.kwanjai@ncl.ac.uk

Sponsoring institution: Newcastle University

Details of the project: This project will conduct a mixed-methods research to study Thai transnational media consumption by Lao women in three regional areas of Laos: Vientiane, Bokeo, and Bolikhamsai city. The cultural policy-making of Laos is also considered. For data collection, I employ a paper questionnaire and paper TV diaries to explore why and how the participants watch Thai TV, especially soap operas. Then focus group discussion will be used to analyse the interpretations of Thai soap operas in Lao audiences' perspectives. I also ask for permission to conduct in-depth interviews with Lao policy makers as to how they undertake any defensive measures to sustain and preserve their national culture.

Purpose of the research: The aims of this study are: (i) to explore Thai cross-border and cross-cultural TV consumption, in particular soap operas by Lao women; (ii) to analyse Lao women's attitudes and interpretations of Thai soap operas in relation to their agency and identity construction; (iii) to explore Lao cultural policy making towards consumption of non-Lao TV by Laotians in their daily lives

Terms for withdrawal: You are free to withdraw from the project at any time and any stage.

Use of data: The data you provide will be used for academic purpose only. I will not share your data with other researchers unless I have your permission.

Storage of data: In order to ensure complete confidentiality, your data will be anonymised immediately after it has been collected. It will be securely stored in my PhD PC and external hard drive. No one else will be able to access your data.

Participant:

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Researcher:

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Appendix G Research participant consent form

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick box as appropriate):

| | | |
|----|---|--------------------------|
| 1. | I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the Information Sheet dated _____. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. | I understand the researcher will ask for filling the questionnaire and TV diary about media consumption | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. | I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. | The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained to me (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.). | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. | The use of the data in research has been explained to me. I know that the data I provide is to be anonymous. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. | I voluntarily agree to participate in the project. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. | I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form. | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Participant:

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Researcher:

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Appendix H The results of questionnaire survey

Table 1

| Type of TV | Lao Female Viewers | |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------|
| | Frequency | Percent |
| Television | 24 | 13.0 |
| Cable | 72 | 38.9 |
| Satellite | 85 | 45.9 |
| TV online | 4 | 2.2 |
| Total | 185 | 100.0 |

This table 1 shows types of TV. The table shows that 45.9% of Lao women watched Thai TV via satellite TV (85 women), 38.9% of them watched cable TV (72 women), and 2.2% of the women watched online TV respectively (4 women).

Table 2

| With Whom | Lao Female Viewers | |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------|
| | Frequency | Percent |
| Family | 135 | 73.0 |
| Friend | 15 | 8.1 |
| Alone | 35 | 18.9 |
| Total | 185 | 100.0 |

This table 2 shows who a group of Lao women watched Thai TV with. The table revealed that most of them watched Thai TV with their families (165 women, or 73%), alone (35 women, or 18.9%) and with friends (15 women, or 8.1%) in sequence.

Table 3

| Means of communication for access Thai TV programmes | Lao Female Viewers | |
|---|--------------------|--------------|
| | frequency | Percent |
| Satellite TV | 171 | 94.0 |
| Personal computer | 9 | 4.9 |
| Smart phone | 14 | 7.7 |
| Tablet/iPad | 7 | 3.8 |
| Internet/website | 15 | 8.2 |
| Total | 216 | 100.0 |

The table 3 reveals the types of Thai TV Lao women watched. The table shows that 90.4% of the women watched Thai TV through satellite (171), whereas 7.7 % watched Thai TV via smart phone (14), and only 3.8% of them watched Thai TV through Tablet or iPad (7).

Table 4

| Period of time | Lao Female Viewers | |
|----------------|--------------------|--------------|
| | Frequency | Percent |
| Less an hour | 10 | 5.4 |
| 2 - 3 hours | 61 | 33.0 |
| 3 - 4 hours | 43 | 23.2 |
| 4 - 6 hours | 44 | 23.8 |
| More 6 hours | 27 | 14.6 |
| Total | 185 | 100.0 |

The table 4 shows the length of time spent watching Thai TV. The table demonstrates that from a total of 185 Lao women, the majority of them watched Thai TV for 2 – 3 hours (33%), 4 – 6 hours (23.8%) and almost the same number for 3-4 hours (23.2%).

Table 5

| Reasons for Thai soaps viewing | Lao Female Viewers | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| | Frequency | Percent |
| Actor and Actress | 74 | 27.0 |
| Story | 101 | 37.5 |
| Setting and Location | 19 | 7.1 |
| Song or sound tracks | 41 | 15.2 |
| Production | 26 | 9.7 |
| Other | 8 | 3.0 |
| Total | 269 | 100.0 |

The table 5 shows the reasons why Lao women enjoyed watching Thai TV soap operas. The results indicate that the women liked the storylines (37.5%), the actors and actresses (27%), the songs or sound tracks, (15.2%) the production (9.7%), and the setting and location (7.1%).

Table 6

| Type | Level of comments | | | | | Mean |
|--|---|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------------|------|
| | strongly agree | agree | neutral | disagree | strongly disagree | |
| | I am interested in romantic comedy dramas | 40 (21.9) | 89 (48.6) | 53 (29.0) | 1 (0.5) | |
| I am interested in action dramas | 22 (12.0) | 77 (42.1) | 74 (40.4) | 8 (4.4) | 2 (1.1) | 3.60 |
| I am interested in period/history dramas | 35 (19.1) | 80 (43.7) | 58 (31.7) | 7 (3.8) | 3 (1.6) | 3.75 |
| I am interested in horror dramas | 27 (14.8) | 71 (38.8) | 67 (36.6) | 16 (8.7) | 2 (1.1) | 3.57 |

The table 6 displays the percentage and means of the interest in types of TV dramas of Lao women. The findings indicate that women were interested in romantic comedy dramas as agree, at 48.6% (89 women), neutral, at 29% (53 women), and strongly agree, at 21.9%, 401 women) at the mean score of 3.92. Regarding their interest in action drama, they responded agree, at 42.1% (77 women), neutral, at 40.4% (74 women), and strongly agree, 12% (22 women) at the

mean score of 3.60. As regards their interest in period or history dramas, most of them agree, at 43.7% (80 women), neutral, at 31.7% (58 women), and strongly agree, at 19.1% (35 women) at the mean score of 3.75. In connection with their interest in horror dramas, they responded agree, at 38.8% (71 women), neutral, at 36.6% (67 women), and strongly agree, at 14.8% (27 women) at the mean score of 3.57 respectively.

Table 7

| The amount of Thai soaps | Lao Female Viewers | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| | Frequency | Percent |
| Less than or equal to 10 stories | 73 | 39.5 |
| 11 - 20 stories | 44 | 23.7 |
| 21 - 30 stories | 32 | 17.3 |
| 31 - 40 stories | 21 | 11.4 |
| 41 - 50 stories | 15 | 8.1 |
| Total | 185 | 100.0 |

The table 7 illustrates the percentage of the number of Thai TV soap operas Lao women have watched in the range of 50 stories for 11 months. The results indicate that they watched Thai TV soap operas less than or equal to 10 stories (73 women, or 39.5%), 11-20 stories (44 women, or 23.7%), 21–30 stories (32 women, or 17.3%), 31-40 stories (21 women, or 11.4%) and 41-50 stories (15 women, or 8.1%).

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