

# Vietnamese Mumpreneurs?

## Middle-class Mothers Negotiating Motherhood and Work in Northern Vietnam

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the construction of motherhood in Northern Vietnam and how motherhood influences engagement with digital entrepreneurship. The study relies on 10 in-depth interviews with middle-class mothers of young children in urban areas in Northern Vietnam, who are currently running online businesses through Facebook. Existing literature on motherhood in Vietnam has placed motherhood within the context of the family without references to class differences. Drawing on Bourdieu's class analysis, intensive mothering ideology and the concept of mumpreneur, this study finds that motherhood in Northern Vietnam is constructed as the primary duty of women and as a result, women are expected to mother intensively and perform more than their husbands within the domestic sphere. Being middle-class influences one's mothering beliefs and practices in important ways, including through providing women the possibility to negotiate their gender roles and work by delegating care work to qualified external institutions. Engaging in digital entrepreneurship for the mothers in the study is a way of doing meaningful work which provides extra income, enriches one's social circle and helps validate one's capabilities to family members.

**Keyword:** *middle-class, gender roles, motherhood, Northern Vietnam, entrepreneurship, mumpreneur*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### Context of the Study

More than one third of all entrepreneurs are women according to the 2007 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (in Nel et al., 2010: 7). Female entrepreneurship has been recognized by governments around the world as the key growth sector in the period of global economic recession (Ekinsmyth, 2014: 1230). One business model within female entrepreneurship that has been attracting attention recently in several countries is *mumpreneurship* (Nel et al., 2010: 7; Ekinsmyth, 2011: 104; Göransson, 2016). *Mumpreneur* refers to “an individual who discovers and exploits new business opportunities within a social and geographical context that seeks to integrate the demands of motherhood and business ownership” (Ekinsmyth, 2011: 105). Vietnam makes an interesting case to examine the *mumpreneur* phenomenon as most Vietnamese women 1) undertake the roles of worker as well as mother and 2) are as likely or more likely than men to engage in entrepreneurship (Bélanger and Oudin, 2007: 107; Kelley et al., 2015: 7). In Vietnam, Facebook remains the most popular platform for entrepreneurship as it draws in 40 million users or nearly half the country’s population (Tomiya, 2017). From observing my own Facebook, it is not uncommon to find both individual accounts and groups of mothers all over Vietnam managing businesses online. Young mothers, casually known as *các bà mẹ bỉm sữa*<sup>1</sup> or the diaper and milk mothers, particularly the urban middle-class ones, have founded businesses on Facebook after the birth of their children with inventory ranging from imported baby products to cosmetics and iPhone chargers. Nevertheless, literature on *mumpreneurs* remains scarce and case studies are limited to a handful of developed nations, namely Singapore, Japan, United Kingdom and Australia. This thesis, thus, seeks to illuminate the *mumpreneur* phenomenon in Northern Vietnam from the perspectives of class and gender. Due to broad regional, urban-rural and ethnic differences in Vietnam, the study will focus on middle-class mothers residing in cities and urban areas in Northern provinces of the country. The thesis aims to understand middle-class mothers’ engagement with digital entrepreneurship by examining to what extent their motherhood experience and social expectations influence their practicing entrepreneurship. In other words,

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<sup>1</sup>It is unclear when and where was the term coined. The term particularly applies to younger mothers (less than 40 years old) since it is this demographic that has needs for (breast or formula) milk and diapers.

what significance do employment and financial independence carry for middle-class mothers in Northern Vietnam?

### **Study Aim and Research Questions**

The study aims to understand how one's motherhood experience motivates digital entrepreneurship. By researching mothers' perspectives and reflections on motherhood, the social expectations placed on them by their families and their motivation to start their own businesses, the thesis investigates to what extent their middle-class motherhood experience influences their career choices. The main research question asks:

- *How does motherhood shape middle-class mothers' engagement with digital entrepreneurship in Northern Vietnam?*

Sub-questions:

- *How are mothering beliefs, practices and motherhood experience shaped of middle-class mothers in Northern Vietnam shaped?*
- *What are the social expectations surrounding motherhood and employment in middle-class families in Northern Vietnam?*
- *What are the factors that influence the choice to be part of the mumpreneur culture among the informants?*

### **Significance of the Study**

The outcome of the study is to contribute to the understanding of how motherhood is constructed and practiced within the context of the family in urban Northern Vietnam and to add to the sparse literature body on mumpreneurship in developing economies. Moreover, the study seeks to answer how social status, specifically being middle-class, shape one's motherhood experience and play a role in the mothering-work negotiation.

### **Disposition**

The thesis consists of six chapters with the first chapter serving as the introduction to the research problem, study aim and research questions. Chapter 2 discusses Bourdieu's analysis of class, motherhood as a concept, intensive mothering ideology and finally the "mumpreneur".

Chapter 3 reviews the available literature on motherhood and middle-class in Vietnam as well as research on female entrepreneurs in Vietnam and mumpreneurs as a concept in Asia. Chapter 4 presents the study design, research method and ethical considerations. The study employs semi-structured interviews with 10 middle-class mothers from urban areas of Northern Vietnam who currently are running online businesses through Facebook. Chapter 5 examines the findings from these interviews. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis and suggests implication for further research.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTS

### Conceptualizing Class and Motherhood

Class is central in discussing motherhood and digital entrepreneurship for two reasons. First of all, there are significant class differences in mothering beliefs and practices (Hays, 1996: 86; McMahon, 1995: 35; Miller, 2005: 55; Maher, 2010: 22). Due to the stark differences in financial resources, social and cultural capital, it is understandable that for example, middle-class mothers would have different views on what constitutes a good mother than their working-class counterparts (Hays, 1996: 86; McMahon, 1995: 35). The middle-class in Vietnam has a strong urge to incorporate elements of *distinction* to set themselves apart from the working poor (Bélanger et al., 2012: 9). One way in which these elements of *distinction* are manifested is through consumption patterns. Middle-class wealth allows for access to a variety of choices: from daycare to extracurricular activities, while the working-class on the other hand can only afford the necessities (Hays, 1996: 89; Nguyen, 2015: 107). Investment in education is another aspect prevalent among middle-class families. Crabb (2010) points out that middle-class Chinese families have “a fervent relationship” to education and a will to invest in education as it is considered a tool for social mobility (387-8). Similarly, such aspirations and investment for the children to do well in school is common among middle-class families in Singapore and Vietnam (Göransson, 2015: 212; Nguyen, 2015: 107). A study on middle-class mothers in Vietnam demonstrates that the consumption of high quality educational toys is popular since such toys are considered a good investment for the child’s future and at the same time an effective way to train the child to acquire proper class taste (Nguyen et al., 2017: 4).



Studies of middle-class in Asia have pointed out the intertwinedness of class identity and gender practices. Middle-class women in Singapore, for example, strive to fulfill both their role as mother and wife as well as the working woman who aims for a better life (Purushotam, 2002 cited in Bélanger et al., 2012: 7). Similarly, middle-class Vietnamese women master the art of tending to their husbands and children while not forgetting to maintain the right appearance and possessions (Leshkovich, 2012: 100). Phrased differently, one's mothering beliefs and practices are powerfully shaped by social class.

Class also plays a significant role in guiding one to the entrepreneurial path. Wadhwa et al. (2009) found in a study on entrepreneurship in the technology sector in the United States that a majority of the founders of the new companies are of middle-class background to be compared with a very small percentage from extremely wealthy or poor backgrounds (in Solimano, 2014: 65). Nie et al. (2009) point out in a study in China that most of the entrepreneurs interviewed had achieved security and status from their positions as government officials, experts in the industry or professional managers prior to their venturing into entrepreneurship (111-112). Such examples from around the world suggest that digital entrepreneurship, with its financial and technological prerequisites is a career path more likely chosen by middle-class than working-class persons.

Nevertheless, class remains “an avoided subject” and difficult to pinpoint in Vietnam due to years under state socialism (1954-1986 in Northern Vietnam) in which the middle-class were considered the exploitative class and eliminated to make way for the working class and peasantry (Bélanger et al., 2012: 8; Nguyen-vo, 2004 in Earl, 2014: 23; Nguyen, 2015: 15). In contemporary Vietnam, the term middle-class is never used in the media which is strongly guided by the Communist Party and the middle-class themselves have “moved cautiously toward displaying and identifying class status” (Bélanger et al., 2012: 4, 8). Therefore, class in Vietnam as argued by Bélanger et al. (2012) should be looked at not by income level or profession but rather as social groups sharing certain lifestyles and relate to certain types of social relations shaped by “the symbolic power embedded in those lifestyles” (9). Arguably, the most appropriate approach to class in the Vietnamese context comes from Bourdieu's *class of*

*distinction* analysis. According to Bourdieu, different classes possess different amounts of economic capital, cultural capital and social capital (1984: 114). Moreover, class exists as a dynamic social space which shapes and is shaped by individuals' identities and actions (Nguyen, 2015: 17). Class *habitus*, in Bourdieusian thinking, refers to beliefs, practices, taste and thought that are "unconsciously performed" due to early life experience and socialization (ibid.; Bourdieu, 1984: 170; Seymour, 2004: 3; Maton, 2008 in Bélanger et al., 2012: 10). The middle-class differs from the working-class in their *habitus of distinction* which revolves around social practices such as consumption in forms relating to culture in the anthropological sense, namely food, clothing, interior decor (ibid.; Bourdieu, 1984: 184; Weininger, 2005: 93). One purpose of such consumerist practices is to differentiate themselves from the working-class (Seymour, 2004: 8; Leshkovich, 2012: 97). The women in my study have adopted a consumerist lifestyle whereby they seek to acquire items most appropriate for their social class (high quality imported beauty and baby products, imported brand name clothing articles and accessories).

Mothering refers to the personal practices involved with meeting the needs of the child while motherhood is the context in which "mothering takes place and is experienced" (Miller, 2005: 3). The concept of motherhood in Asia, just as in the Western world, has been shaped historically, socially, culturally, politically and morally which in turn, defines our experience as mothers (Miller, 2005: 3, 46). Mothering ideologies also change according to political and economic demands (Miller, 2005: 55). Nevertheless, this is problematic because class, race and culture affect how motherhood is experienced. Though motherhood in the past was analyzed as natural and biological processes, it should be examined as a product resulted from the dynamic between the mother and the society at large (Glenn, 1994: 4; Miller, 2005: 56; Maher, 2010: 16). In this thesis, an understanding of how motherhood (as opposed to fatherhood) is constructed is essential in explaining how middle-class women accept their gendered "heavenly duties" as wives and mothers, while at the same time striving to reclaim their identity as working women. A provision in Article 4 of the Marriage and Family Law states that it is the duty of the State, society, and families to help mothers fulfill their noble motherhood functions but made no reference to assisting fathers in their fathering role (Ministry of Justice Vietnam, 2014). At the

same time, article 17 of the same law states that wife and husband are equal both in their rights as well as responsibilities within the family (ibid.). Middle-class mothers, instead of demanding equal responsibilities from their spouses, prefer to disassociate the fathers from the care work and delegate the job where they feel incompetent to external care institutions. Persistent attitudes justifying women's unequal role and the fathers' low participation in the family prove that Confucian values, which view women as subordinate to men, remain influential in Vietnamese society (Jayakody and Phuong, 2013: 247-249).

### **Intensive Mothering Ideology**

To make sense of the so-called "heavenly duties" expected of Vietnamese women, we must examine the ideology of intensive mothering, a historically constructed model for appropriate childcare with its roots in 18th century Western Europe (Hays, 1996: 21, 29). The model portrays children as innocent and in need of protection by their mothers; the most important role the woman can have is that of a mother. This child-centered model expects the mother to commit to meeting every need of the child by investing time, energy and resources (Walls et al., 2016: 247). It is suggested that in order to effectively fulfill these requirements, the mother should not be working (ibid.). Intensive mothering is seen to be especially important for mothers of young children because they are the most vulnerable and should not be left with strangers as caregivers. In other words, a good mother stays at home with her children and prioritizes their needs over her own (Hays, 1996: 57). Although intensive mothering ideology is thought to be based on white, middle-class, heterosexual values of childcare, research shows that it has become popular in non-Western societies such as Singapore and Vietnam (Hays, 1996; Göransson: 2016; Ho, 2007; Luccisano and Wall, 2009; The Voice, 2010 in Nguyen et al., 2017: 1). Therefore, intensive mothering ideology is useful in explaining expectations in the Vietnamese family as well as why middle-class women in this thesis are not demanding equal childcare responsibilities from their husbands.

### ***Mumpreneur***

Finally, we shall look at mumpreneurship, a phenomenon which is arguably based around intensive mothering practice. The term *mumpreneur* is defined by Ekinsmyth as “an individual who discovers and exploits new business opportunities within a social and geographical context that seeks to integrate the demands of motherhood and business ownership” (2011: 105). Mumpreneurship is an old concept newly branded. Cromie and Hayes (1988) had identified three types of female entrepreneurship based around childcare responsibilities: *innovators*, *dualists* and *returners* (in Lewis, 2010: 127). The *innovators* have strong business commitment and no childcare duties; the *dualists* were motivated to set up their business due to their childcare responsibilities which are prioritized; and the *returners* saw opportunities to return to workforce after raising their children through setting up their own businesses (ibid.). Mumpreneurship has been growing rapidly in the past decade with the help of information and communication technologies (Ekinsmyth, 2013: 1236). *Mumpreneur* as an identity, however, is only adopted by some mothers as a source of pride and business strategy (ibid.).

## **III. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Family and Motherhood in Vietnam**

Motherhood in Vietnam is a topic that has been studied as part of research on women, marriage and family life (see Pham, 1999; Pettus, 2003; Barbieri and Bélanger, 2009; Rydström, 2010). Vietnamese motherhood must be examined in the context of a network of family relationships. The traditional (that is, pre-1945) Vietnamese family stresses the importance of filial piety: respecting and caring for the older generations both when they are alive and after their death (Pham, 1999: 20). It is crucial to note that the Vietnamese family follows the patrilocal residential pattern in which the married woman moves into the home of her husband’s parents and becomes part of his family. A household has typically consisted of at least three generations: the parents, the couple and their children. The reason behind the practice lies in the filial piety concept: the son and his wife must show their devotion to his parents (Pham, 1999: 29). This

virilocal residential pattern continues to exist to this day. The 1997-1998 Vietnam Living Standard Survey data illustrates that 70.9 percent of persons between the age 60-69 co-reside with at least one adult son (Barbieri, 2009: 148). The 2011 Vietnam Aging Survey reveals that 50 percent of persons aged 60 and over live with a grandchild of any age, and 31 percent co-reside with a grandchild less than 10 years of age (Knodel and Nguyen, 2014: 1973). Of these persons with a grandchild less than 10 years old, 33.6 percent cared for the grandchild in the past year and 87 percent do not view it a serious burden (Knodel and Nguyen, 2014: 1981).

The need to marry and become a mother in Northern Vietnam stems from a moral imperative to build a family unit: to establish a tie between the spouses, to bond it with the previous generation and to connect the living to the dead (Pashigian, 2002: 148). In other words, motherhood remains a strong social norm in Vietnam (Pashigian, 2002: 135; Bélanger and Oudin, 2007: 112). The median age at first birth is higher for women in urban areas than those in rural areas and the median age correlates positively with education level according to the 2002 Demographic and Health Survey (Committee for Population, Family and Children [Vietnam], and ORC Macro, 2003: 34). The median age of Vietnamese mothers in urban areas at first birth is 24.9 and those who completed higher secondary education is also 24.9<sup>2</sup> (Committee for Population, Family and Children [Vietnam], and ORC Macro, 2003: 35). State campaigns after 1970 promoted the notion that an ideal family should practice family planning and by 1988, a two child policy was implemented in order to facilitate socio-economic development (Drummond, 2004: 165; Scornet, 2009: 52). As a result, the fertility rate decreased from about 5 children in 1970s to 2.2 in the late 1990s (General Statistical Office, 2003; Allman *et al.*, 1991; Nguyen-Dinh, 1996; Gammeltoft, 1999; Phai *et al.*, 1996; Haughton, 1997 in Bélanger and Oudin, 2007: 119).

Research on the family in Vietnam suggests that the contemporary notion of family is a merger of Confucian and Communist ideals (Rydström, 2010: 171). Traditionally, the Vietnamese concepts of family and womanhood were adopted largely from Confucianism which emphasized hierarchy rather than equality. Following the Confucian tradition, women were expected to

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<sup>2</sup> The survey did not disclose age at first birth according to income level or class.

uphold the Three Bonds: the unmarried woman should obey her father; when married, she should obey her husband; and when the husband died, she should follow her son (Nguyen et al., 2017: 2). The men in the family assumed their roles as the social relations heads thus, leaving the women to manual labor work both inside the home as well as out in the fields (Pham, 1999: 33-34). However, after the Communist party took power in 1945, efforts were made by the government to abolish feudal practices and encourage equality among men and women. Confucian ideology, deemed as a remnant of the feudal system, could not be exercised in its original form and new laws were passed to protect a number of rights of women (namely ban on child marriage, abuse and law on owning property) (Rydström, 2010: 172). The forms of work that women performed after 1945 also transformed. During the First Indochina War (1946-1954) and the American War in Vietnam (1955-1975), many women participated in combat (Gootschang Turner and Hao, 1998; Taylor, 1999 in Bélanger and Oudin, 2007: 111) while others took up jobs left behind by men and maintained household responsibilities (Bélanger and Oudin, 2007: 111). State campaigns in the 1950s, 60s and 70s stressed the importance of mothers contributing to the labor force (Drummond, 2004: 164; Korinek, 2004: 797; Bélanger and Oudin, 2007: 112). More women obtained jobs in state-owned enterprises and the public sector and those with children were provided with free childcare and preschool education (ibid.). According to Belanger and Oudin (2007), that women are employed outside of the home has been perceived as the norm for the last five decades and the idea that a good mother should stay home with the child was never dominant in the Vietnamese society (ibid.). Whether it was a Confucian system or a more equal society under the Communist Party, women have been expected to mother their children while holding a job (Bélanger and Oudin, 2007: 106).

Within the domestic sphere, women are expected to fulfill their “heavenly duties” (*thiên chức*) as wives and mothers while Vietnamese men assume the role of authoritative heads of the family (Bélanger and Oudin, 2007: 120; Nguyen, 2015: 15). Women’s duties are understood as reproduction, childcare as well as housework (Rydström, 2014 in Nguyen, 2015: 15). This explains why the husbands’ contribution at home “remains minimal compared to their wives” (Bélanger and Oudin, 2007: 120). Data collected at the end of 1990s shows that among those

aged 25-64, women on average spend 13.6 hours per week on housework while men only work 6 hours (ibid.). Bélanger and Oudin (2007) observe that it is not uncommon in Hanoi to see husbands going for after work drinks while the women rush home to take care of the housework (ibid.). Domestic work, nonetheless, is not really considered a proper occupation and it should be done when the woman is not working outside of the home (Nguyen, 2015: 115). From these observations, it is clear that women have to take on more responsibilities at home while having a full time job.

What then has been said about middle-class mothers in Vietnam? The only literature on Vietnamese middle-class mothers mainly discusses consumption patterns (Nguyen, 2015: 107; Nguyen et al., 2017). Nguyen (2015) argues that there has been a shift in middle-class childrearing practices since the child is now considered to have much more complex needs than previously (107). Thus, it is more common for middle-class women to stay home to care for the child in the early years. Middle-class families tend to focus on “nutrition, hygiene and stimulating care” in the first few years of the child’s life and “academic and cultural education” in the later years (ibid.). Middle-class parents view extra-curricular activities such as music, arts, English, sports a crucial component in the development of the child and therefore, willing to finance private courses. Research by Nguyen et al. (2017) on toy consumption also supports such findings on middle-class childrearing. The study asserts that toy consumption served as means for middle-class women to fulfill social expectations as a mother as it demonstrates the woman’s engagement and investment in the child’s well-being (Nguyen et al., 2017: 6). The data illustrates that “the importance of learning and developing children’s social skills” is a crucial feature of good mothering and typical of the middle-class. Another key finding from the study shows that although these middle-class mothers do experience the feeling of guilt due to the limited time spent with their children as they work outside of home, they do not adhere to the selfless intensive mothering ideology and see full-time employment as “part of the modern-woman identity” (Nguyen et al., 2017: 7). While there has been research on working mothers (Korinek, 2004; Bélanger and Oudin, 2007; Nguyen et al., 2017), none of the studies actually closely examines the motherhood experience of middle-class mumpreneurs in Northern

Vietnam. This calls for research on the expectations and aspirations of middle-class mothers in contemporary Vietnam so as to inform our understanding of today's Vietnamese family.

### **Female Entrepreneurship**

Entrepreneurship can be generally defined as “a practice by which an individual habitually creates and develops new innovative ventures of value in response to perceived business opportunities” (Maritz, 2004 in Nel et al., 2010: 8). However, in this study, I will employ an alternative meaning which defines entrepreneurship as self-employment since self-employment constitutes “a relevant entrepreneurial activity in developing countries” (Hanson, 2009 in Poon et al., 2012: 311). According to Poon et al. (2012), entrepreneurship is relatively new in Northern Vietnam due to its lengthier history (1945-1986) under the centralized planning economy than Southern Vietnam (310). Much of the contemporary entrepreneurial landscape in Vietnam is dominated by households rather than firms (Steer and Sen, 2010 in Poon et al., 2012: 311).

Which factors then draw women to entrepreneurship? Scholarly research in Asian studies points to fulfillment, flexibility, freedom and autonomy as the main reasons for why women choose entrepreneurship (Teo, 1996; Maysami and Goby, 1999 in Gerrard et al., 2003: 143). The motives to be entrepreneur however, are not fixed and instead change over time (Williams, 2009 in Nguyen et al., 2014: 56). Nguyen et al. (2014) focus primarily on Vietnamese female entrepreneurs in rural settings and their study illustrates some key points: these rural women are *forced* entrepreneurs who became engaged in entrepreneurship out of necessity to improve their livelihood, and although they headed own businesses they also had to maintain responsibilities for their home and children (58-61). Studies further suggest family support (in the forms of financial contributions and unpaid labor) has been the motivational factor for Vietnamese women to be entrepreneurs (Gerrard et al., 2003: 153; Nguyen et al., 2016: 11). At a difference from existing research on female entrepreneurship which was conducted in rural areas, this thesis will explore the making of middle-class mumpreneurs in urban Northern Vietnam.



To highlight the particular conditions of mumpreneurs in Vietnam, this thesis will employ two studies on mumpreneurs in Japan and Singapore as comparative case studies in the discussion section. According to Leung (2011), the notion of a working mother is not encouraged in Post-war Japan (255). The two mothers in Leung's study had reasonable success in their careers but ended their career after the births of their children (one could not reenter the workforce as the company did not expect her to come back) (2011: 256). Both are aspiring working mothers whose maternal identity is clearly expressed in the names of their companies: Digimom Workers and Mothernet. The motivation to start their own ventures comes from their struggle to combine and balance motherhood and work. It can be concluded that their new career choice is greatly influenced by the confining masculine corporate culture in Japan rather than the voluntary prioritization of their children's needs. In the Singaporean case, the mothers in the study started their own businesses to "better support their children developmentally and academically" focusing on academic activities rather than basic caregiving (Göransson, 2016). These mothers describe themselves as "involved" and involved parenting, according to Göransson, bears strong resemblance to intensive mothering, a gendered concept that places the responsibility of the child's welfare on the mothers who should invest much of their time, energy and money into meeting their children's needs (Göransson, 2016; Walls, Helms & Gryzwacz, 2016). It is clear from Göransson's study that the choice of practicing mumpreneurship derives from the prioritization of the children's best (academic) interests.

### **The Vietnamese Middle-class**

Finally, we return to the middle-class and try to understand what being middle-class means in the Vietnamese context. Although difficult to define, researchers tend to view the Vietnamese middle-class as similar to other Southeast Asian countries or China (see King, 2008; Earl, 2014; Drummond, 2012; Leshkowich, 2012; Nguyen, 2015). Vietnam's new middle-class, like middle-class in China and other Southeast Asian countries, is a primary product of economic growth and reforms (King, 2008: 85). Middle-class identity in the Vietnamese context has undergone interrupted and uneven development between the French colonial era until now. During the French colonization, the French 'association' policy allowed for ambitious young

Vietnamese to be educated abroad and thus increased the number of highly skilled Vietnamese professionals in journalism, law, medicine and education. These new white collar professionals exerted great influence in urban centers of Vietnam (Bélanger et al., 2012: 3). During state socialism (1954-1986 in Northern Vietnam), the middle-class were punished as they were seen as enemies of the people – made up of the peasants and the working class (Bélanger et al., 2012: 4; Nguyen, 2015: 17). The reemergence of the middle-class in Vietnam during *Đổi Mới* era, or the socio-economic reform period initiated in 1986, can be seen as a governmental initiative (King, 2008: 85). King (2008) describes the new middle class in Vietnam as having strong aspirations to do better, having an education, adopting a consumerist lifestyle and having access to digital information (96). Middle-class citizens in Vietnam tend to claim that they deserve what they have because they worked for it and aligned their success with their ability to be civilized and modern (Leshkovich, 2012: 98). Another aspect that is much focused on by researchers on the Vietnamese middle-class is consumption (King, 2008: 93; Drummond, 2012). Cars, fitness and beauty services, upmarket dining, high quality children products and even apartments in high rises are popular according to Vietnamese consumer patterns (Nguyen, 2015: 107). Leshkovich (2012) and Nguyen (2015) note that middle-class consumption is profoundly gendered in the Vietnamese context: the image of the Vietnamese woman has been shifted from a working-class laborer to a middle-class caretaker who should focus on her husband, her children, her appearance as well as her cooking ability (2012: 100; 2015: 107).

#### **IV. METHODOLOGY**

##### **Study Design**

Qualitative research is chosen for this thesis as the method emphasizes words over numbers and is inductive as well as interpretivist in essence (Bryman, 2012: 380). The primary data has been collected through online interviews. Since the study seeks to understand the relations between motherhood and digital entrepreneurship through the interpretation of the participants, semi-structured interviews are the most suitable method of data collection as it provides the interviewer the opportunities to learn about “people’s representation” of their beliefs, ideologies,

motivations and aspirations (Boellstorff et al., 2012: 92). Semi-structured interviews allow more flexibility for the interviewer in terms of tailoring the questions based on the informants' responses. At the same time, semi-structured interview allows the informants to bring up their own concerns, "in their own words and not restricted to the preconceived notions" of the researchers (Davies, 1999: 95). Secondary data from research on mothering and work identity (Ekinsmyth, 2013), middle-class and upper middle-class mumpreneurs in Singapore (Göransson, 2016), and gender role as resource for entrepreneurship (Leung, 2011) is also employed in this thesis for comparison.

### **Sampling**

Since the topic of the thesis deals with digital entrepreneurship, I conducted my fieldwork online using contacts who are my acquaintances, friends of friends, as well as one informant I found in a Facebook group for breastfeeding mothers in Vietnam (*Hội nuôi con bằng sữa mẹ Việt Nam*). I tried contacting mothers whom I knew personally and had good rapport with as they would more likely open up to me. To obtain reasonable data size, I had to ask friends to introduce me to their friends who run online businesses since contacting strangers had proven to be unproductive. All the women interviewed have small children between seven months and three years of age. The mothers are middle-class women between the age of 22 and 32. They all have finished post-secondary education ranging between vocational degree and master degree. Another commonality among these mumpreneurs is that they come from the Northern provinces of Vietnam with 9 out of 10 either living, working or having previously studied in Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam. They all have access to Facebook and use the platform to various extents for business purposes. Five out of ten informants run their online businesses exclusively (with various degrees of success) while the other five also work in offices and school part time, full time or in shifts. This particular method of sampling is called criterion sampling or sampling of individuals that meet specific criteria (Patton, 1990 and Palys, 2008 in Bryman, 2012: 419).

## **The interview process**

Prior to the interviews, I got in touch with the potential participants to introduce myself and provide detailed information on my project via Facebook chat. The ten mothers who expressed interest in contributing to the thesis were given a written consent form as well as a verbal reminder before the interviews about their rights to anonymity, confidentiality and termination should they feel uncomfortable at any point during the interviews. The participants were not provided with questions prior to the actual appointment to ensure the spontaneity of the conversation. All interviews and follow up interviews were conducted and audio recorded between January 20th and March 10th, 2017 via voice call through Facebook or Zalo<sup>3</sup>. Two of the interviews had to be done on two occasions because the informants were short on time during the first occasion. The interviews followed a semi-structured questionnaire list so that I could structure the data according to predetermined themes while at the same time allow participants to elaborate further on what they find important or worth mentioning. The questionnaire, which can be found in the appendix, consists of four sections: basic background information, personal reflections on being a mother, comments on how the participants are expected to perform as mothers and finally their thoughts on whether a mother should work and their own career choice. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese so that the participants could best express themselves. The interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes each and all but one informant was interviewed at home.

## **The transcription, translation and data analysis**

The data was transcribed by me and portions of the interviews were translated into English to be quoted in the discussion section. The translation was done by me with minor consultation from Ms. Phuong Nguyen who instructs Vietnamese language courses at University of Massachusetts Boston. The reason for consultation stems from the fact that many terms and concepts used by the informants do not have corresponding translations in English. The data was categorized according to themes and patterns that emerged using thematic analysis such as childrearing

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<sup>3</sup> Zalo is a smartphone app with instant messaging, video and voice call functions.

beliefs and practices, intergenerational family role, definition of a good mother, motivation to have children, the values of work and engagement with entrepreneurship (Bryman, 2012: 580).

### **Reflexivity**

*Reflexivity* means that social researchers should be aware of their “necessary connection” to the research situation and their effects upon it (Davies, 1999: 7; Bryman, 2012: 393). As mentioned previously, my own identity as a young middle-class woman and a mother can help the participants feel more comfortable when discussing motherhood with me since several of the questions deal with generational conflicts in mothering ideals as well as gender divisions in child-rearing. Secondly, I am Vietnamese, a mother and can speak Vietnamese fluently thus, it might be easier for me to find and interview other mothers from Vietnam without having a language barrier. At the same time, being a mother in Sweden with very little in common in terms of social expectations and personal experience could also influence my interpretation of the informants’ experiences for the following reasons. Firstly, my informants are subjected to judgements and criticism from their family members as they live with either their in-laws or their parents while I do not share similar experiences due to me having my own apartment. They also received assistance to a greater extent from their families than I do. Thirdly, my partner is not Vietnamese which means that I do not have to adhere to similar cultural and social values as my informants. To tackle this, I adopted a neutral position by not disclosing information about my own parenting beliefs or practices during the interviews unless the informants asked, refraining from expressing my own opinions or assisting the informants with interpretation (Davies, 1999: 96).

### **Limitation and Demarcation**

The data collected does not represent all middle-class mothers in Northern Vietnam since the sample size is small. However, it can be useful in understanding how certain middle-class mothers negotiate their maternal identity with their work identity through digital entrepreneurship. For the research to be representative, its sample should be relevant for the wider population but this is not case for qualitative research focusing on cases (O’Reilly, 2012:

225). The point of qualitative research is to understand a few cases in depth and it can be worthwhile for the purpose of *transferring* what we have learned to another group (ibid.). Another limitation, as mentioned earlier, has to do with the lack of face to face contact between the participants and myself. The interviews could have been longer and more personal if conducted in person. Unfortunately, due to lack of financial resource, I did not have the opportunity to meet the informants. Doing fieldwork online means that there is always a risk of lag due to unstable internet connection which I did experience during some of the interviews (Boellstorff et al., 2012).

### **Validity and Reliability**

*Reliability* refers to the consistency and trustworthiness of the findings or differently put, whether the findings could be reproduced by other researchers at another occasion (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 245). The data should be reliable since it comes directly from my participants without any translators. During the interviews, I tried to ask certain questions both as open-ended questions and closed questions to ensure that the informants are consistent in their understanding of the topic. Some topics require further clarification from the interviewer which means I had to rephrase the questions with more specificities to give the informants a clearer idea. An example of such case is the question on why must a woman give birth to a child in the Vietnamese context. It is, however, naive to assume that only one external reality exists and therefore should be replicable (O'Reilly, 2012: 227). The reality would be re-interpreted differently depending on the setting of the interview as there are four layers of interpretation happening: firstly, the informants had to interpret the questions, then communicate their answers. Their responses were then reinterpreted by me and finally, the data had to be translated into English with minor consultation from a linguist, which as explained in the previous section, could slightly alter what the informants initially intended to convey.

*Validity* pertains to the degree that a method “investigates what it is intended to investigate” thus, in principle, qualitative research can lead to valid scientific knowledge (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 246). Validation depends on the quality of the research design, during the data collection

process and the theoretical interpretation of the findings (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 247). The research has been designed so that the interview questions would investigate what the thesis aims to study. The analysis of the findings would be done using Bourdieu's class analysis since it is the most appropriate approach to understanding class in the Vietnamese context.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As a student in the Masters program in Asian Studies at the Center for East and Southeast Asian Studies, Lund University, I am expected to carry out my thesis project in accordance with the ethical guidelines as outlined in the Center's Guidelines for the Master's Thesis. The data collection process must adhere to the principles of *transparency*, *anonymity*, *free will* and *confidentiality*. The participants were first informed in detail about the research and their role in the research in a comprehensible way (Homan 1991: 71-4 in Davies, 1999: 47; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 70). Consent would then be obtained based on their agreement without coercion or undue influence (ibid.). For my study, consent was obtained verbally before the interviews could be conducted. The principle of *confidentiality* means that any collected data identifying the informants will not be disclosed (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 72). All collected data will be kept private and only used for the purpose of this thesis; something all the more important since online business owners are being targeted by the government due to tax-related questions. Differently put, the informants' participation in the study is voluntary and anonymous. Any informant who felt uncomfortable at any point during the interviewing process or after seeing the draft could ask to terminate her participation without any consequences. The informants could request to see the transcription of the data and comment on whether they feel comfortable with what was written there (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 70).

### **V. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

This chapter presents my findings and analyzes how motherhood shapes middle-class mothers engagement with digital entrepreneurship. I will start by examining the informants' motivation to have children, their motherhood experience and aspirations for the future. The discussion will then explore motherhood in the context of the intergenerational family and consider the role of

the husbands or lack thereof in the childrearing process. Building on this analysis, I will then discuss the mothers' views on the values of work and their motivation to practice digital entrepreneurship. What does digital entrepreneurship mean to the informants?

## **Motherhood and the Vietnamese Family**

### ***Motivation for childbirth***

This section deals with the informants' motivation to have children as it sheds light on the construction of motherhood for the mothers in this study. My findings show that becoming mother for nine of my informants is not a question of *whether* but *when* to have the child. Only one mother explicitly claimed that she had considered being childless and motherhood was unplanned and unexpected. For the mothers who perceived motherhood to be an inevitable part of their lives, several included their family expectation as part of the reason. Others viewed the birth of a child as a necessity for harmony between the spouses while one mother simply did not choose to terminate her unplanned pregnancy. It is important to note that having children is framed within the context of marriage for all of my informants except for Lien, who is a single mother. Only Minh claimed that she had always wanted to be mother and had planned this even before she got married thus, the family factor is not relevant according to her.

Family expectation has been cited most often by my informants both as the reason why they have children and why at their age. Family expectation is two-fold in the Vietnamese context - it is the moral imperative that compels the woman to have children to fulfill her role *in* the family and *for* the family. The woman's duty to bear a child, as Pashigian (2002) argues, served to create a bond between generations, both dead and alive. Mai, who became a mother at the age of 24, explained family expectation as followed:

“Once you get married in Vietnam and have not yet given birth a child, the elderly will definitely talk about it because they want to have grandchildren around (*bé cháu*). The elderly fix the marriages for their children so that we would give birth to their grandchildren; marriage is not about us moving in to live with each other. But I also wanted to have a child after I got married because I also love children (laugh).”



It is clear in Mai's narrative that having a child is motivated by her love for children but it is only secondary to family expectation. Her explanation points out that family expectation has a significant influence on *when* a woman has a child. Thu, who became mother at the age of 30, experienced similar pressure from her family when she first got married. After several years of marriage, her union with her husband dissolved with childlessness cited as the main reason. She later married another partner, gave birth to their child and is trying to conceive again.

Becoming a mother, as identified by several of my informants, serves as a way in which women maintain respect *for* their families. Lien revealed that her father is a strong believer of the "laws of nature" (*quy luật tự nhiên*) in which "women must go to work, get married and give birth" and she is expected to follow it to avoid being different from the rest and judged by outsiders. Similarly, Trang emphasizes the importance of reproduction *in* and *for* the family. Children, she argues, can bring joy to the family when they are young and serve as the main caretakers for the aging parents when they grow up. She believes that becoming mother is a conformist behavior prevalent in Oriental societies (*xã hội phương Đông*) which again illustrates that having a child is only a matter of *when* rather than *whether*.

Another motivation mentioned by three of my informants is to create a bond between the couple. Van and her husband purposely postponed having a child until after the first year of their marriage. She claimed that life was enjoyable but felt that "there was nothing really bonding" the two of them together and decided that they should have a child. The other two informants also view childbirth as essential to any marriage. This highlights the importance of becoming a mother as means to sustain marriage life. The informants' motivations to have children corroborate previous research conducted by Pashigian (2002) which points out childbirth is a moral responsibility that Vietnamese women should strive to fulfill.

It is worth drawing attention to how motherhood is constructed as part of a natural or biological process as argued by Lien's father. The emphasis on the reproductive function of the woman,

rather than of the couple (husband and wife), reinforces the idea that female identity is defined based on their ability to give birth and as a result, convinces the mothers that they are responsible for all tasks within the domestic sphere because they are most capable of doing so. A second implication is that by not fulfilling their roles according to the natural law, women risk being punished or treated as outcast. This is consistent with findings by Pashigian (2002) and Bélanger (2004) on the consequences such as divorce and stigmatization that childless women faced in Vietnam (Pashigian, 2002: 148; Bélanger, 2004: 112). This discussion on the construction of motherhood can provide an understanding of how mothering beliefs and practices are shaped and what social expectations are placed on mothers.

### ***Motherhood experience and aspirations for the future***

This section explores the shaping of middle-class mothering beliefs and practices from the perspective of how the informants perceive the responsibilities of motherhood and what their aspirations are for the future. Motherhood entails a wide range of tasks from daily care routines to cognitive and psychological development. The process is not uniform but rather varies from mother to mother.

Daily care routines such as feeding, putting the child to sleep, caring for the sick child often came up first in the interviews as a crucial part of motherhood. For five other mothers, in addition to the care procedures, cognitive and psychological development in forms of playing with the child and engaging the child in different activities is also important. Nhung, self-identified as an artist and intellectual, emphasizes the significance of reading and talking to the child as well as taking the child out on trips. Van believes that her role as a mother required that she must teach the child “how to talk, to greet the grandparents, to recognize fruits and things in daily life.” Another mother, Lien, also brought up the moral aspect by stating that the most important thing is how to raise a child into a person of good virtues.

Since most of the informants spoke mainly about their mothering practices during the first years of their children’s lives, I posed another question on future aspiration to find out their mothering

beliefs. Rather than deciding for the child, most of the informants claim that they would support the child's choice. Seven of my informants want their children to do well in the future and by which they mean the general well-being of the child, for instance, staying healthy, being active, possessing important social skills, growing up to be a positive contribution to the society. They named several different curricular activities, such as martial arts, art and music as possibilities for their children in the later years.

When asked about academic success, all of the informants express that they do not find it to be the top priority. Anh thinks that it's a plus if the child excels in school but she would feel okay even if her child performs averagely so long as her child has the needed social skills. Trang shares the same attitude regarding school performances as well as being the support for her child regardless of what she finds interesting. Nhung, perhaps influenced by her own upbringing and artistic interests, stresses the importance of the development of the mind over academic development:

“I think physical development, love for animals, nature, learning how to draw, learning music, learning things that are not heavy on the academic side. I want my child to develop as naturally as possible.”

Despite not emphasizing educational success, some of my informants are very keen on seeking out the best educational options available to their children. Thu, for example, will send her daughter to Germany to live with her parents and attend public school there when the girl turns 6 year old, and Linh aims to enroll her son in a private international school in Hanoi. Mai plans to send her daughter to a good preschool with comprehensive pedagogical methods and possibility to learn English within a year. In Thu and Linh's cases, the mothers believe that the Vietnamese public and private school systems are not adequate for their children's development thus, only going abroad or attending a school with an international framework would be good enough. These accounts suggest several points. Firstly, mothering to the informants does not only mean to meet the basic demands of the child but also to ensure that the child will thrive in the future. This is consistent with findings by Nguyen (2015) on middle-class childrearing practices (107). Secondly, following Bourdieu's class analysis, the informants' mothering beliefs and practices

are very much based on the *sense of distinction*, in which they seek to distance themselves from the mediocrity of everyday life through to the pursuit of quality education, namely study abroad or attend an international school as opposed to the public Vietnamese education system. Furthermore, they are generally interested in investing in cultural capital for their children and maximize their children's chance of upward mobility through refined activities such as art, music and traveling. Third of all, while middle-class mothers' views on career choices in Asia remain understudied, these findings corroborate Hays' analysis of middle-class mothers in a different cultural and geographical context (San Diego, California in 1991): middle-class mothers are more likely to allow choices and negotiate the choices with their children (1996: 86). Finally, these middle-class mothers do not prioritize the child's educational success as the ones in Göransson's study (2016). The Singaporean middle-class mumpreneurs are much more invested in the child's educational success and make great effort to achieve that by being active contributors in the children's day to day schoolwork. My three informants who discussed their educational plans are more distant in their practice. Their plans are to delegate the academic work to qualified educators rather than to include themselves as active participants in the child's educational development. Such dissimilarity could stem from two factors: the Vietnamese education system is much less competitive than the Singaporean one which means that the Vietnamese mothers in this study do not experience the same pressure to raise competitive children (Göransson, 2015: 216) and secondly, the informants' children are still a few years from being old enough for primary education consideration.

### ***Motherhood within the family context***

The motherhood experience in the Vietnamese context is also shaped by the interaction with and expectations from other family members such as husbands, parents as well as parents in-law. This section discusses the roles of fathers and grandparents in middle-class families through the perspectives of my informants, in the context of the social expectations placed on different family members.

Eight of the informants currently live with their husbands, one informant is married but the couple do not live in the same household and one informant is a single mother who does not have any contact with the father of her child. Only one mother, Thu, whose husband owns his own company, claimed that her husband took equal care of the child as she did. Three mothers stated that they receive some help on a daily basis from their husbands. Five mothers said that their husbands sometimes play with the child or only have time during the weekend for the child. None of the mothers express disappointment in the unequal division of childcare between them and their spouses. Despite expectations to share equal responsibilities in the family according to the Marriage and Family Law, my findings show that the Vietnamese middle-class fathers in the study contribute far less than what is considered equal (Ministry of Justice, 2014). This is consistent with data on the Vietnamese family from the late 1990s (Bélanger and Oudin, 2007: 120). There are three factors contributing to the lack of physical contribution from the fathers and the absence of dissatisfaction from the mothers despite unequal division of labor at home. Firstly, fathers are socially not expected or encouraged to actively take part in the childrearing process (Rydström, 2003 in Nguyen, 2015: 15). This is also evident in the short parental leave policy in Vietnam<sup>4</sup> which means that the fathers are not able to participate in the childrearing process for most of the day. Secondly, it is a common practice in Vietnam for husbands to give parts of their income to their wives every month and five of my informants acknowledged such practice in their relationships. Such financial contribution from the husbands, according to some of the mothers, can be understood as compensation for their lack of involvement in domestic work. For others, it simply means that they have assumed the caretaker role in the family thus, it is natural that the husbands should fulfill the breadwinner role outside of home. The third reason can be attributed to the various degrees of assistance offered by the grandparents, primarily the grandmother (mother-in-law), as intergenerational cohabitation remains a common practice in Northern Vietnam (Jayakody and Phuong, 2013: 237).

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<sup>4</sup> Currently, mothers are entitled to 6 months paid maternity leave with birth of one child if the mothers have been paying social insurance fee. Prior to 2016, fathers were not entitled to any paid paternity leave. However, a new law grants fathers 5 paid days for natural birth and 7 days for Cesarean birth or birth before 32 weeks if they have been paying social insurance fee (Social Security [Vietnam], 2016).

Eight of the informants live with the parents in-law while two mothers live with their biological parents. The reasons for cohabiting are a mix of insufficient resource to purchase one's own home, assistance with domestic work and patrilocal residential duty. All informants receive help from their parents and/or in-laws in various degrees. The assistance varies depending on the stages of the child for example, when the child was smaller, the grandparents would assist with food shopping, cooking and cleaning. As the child becomes less dependent on the mother for care and the mother returning to work, the grandparents take over the caring routines. Some grandparents also support the couples financially and materially. Most of my informants expressed sincere gratitude for the assistance they received from the grandparents. In Chau's case, mother of 7 month-old twins, her mother in-law assumes the parenting role as Chau returns to her office job. In addition to her husband, she also receives assistance at night from her father in-law and brother in-law. Van who runs her online business exclusively also appreciates the support she gets from both parents and her sibling. For her, the assistance from all family members (except her husband) lightens her load. Lien, as a single mother who does not keep contact with the child's father or his family, relies greatly on her parents for help from picking up to caring for the child while she is away. Thu shares similar gratitude by claiming that both her husband and her would not be able to work without the support of her in-laws. Nonetheless, some of the mothers while recognizing the help they received from the grandparents convey that they would rather have more autonomy in the childrearing process. Trang reveals:

“Yes, they helped a lot. However, I really don't want the grandparents to help too much because the child is mine. Thus, I want to take care of my child on my own and guide her development.”

When asked about who has the biggest responsibility in childrearing, only three informants stated that the mother has the biggest responsibility while one informant listed both parents as playing the main role. The other six informants believe that the parents and grandparents carry equally significant roles in the development the child. Mai only considers other family members as assistants while she remains the main caretaker. For Trang, it is first and foremost a matter of claiming authority in the family:

“It is clearly the combination of everyone but I am the one who arranges that combination. Of course everything requires collaboration of all but there must be one person who organizes everything and I am that main person who is responsible for everything.”

Minh, who lived away from home and her parents at young age, firmly stresses:

“I think it’s everyone [‘s role] because if everyone work together then the child will feel that s/he is cared for and loved. If it is only the father or the mother then the child will later feel emotionally neglected or marginalized.”

Van sees each and every family member has having a particular role in the childrearing process and acknowledges their significance in her motherhood experience:

“There must be someone in the family that the child is scared of, a person who the child is not scared of. Generally speaking, everyone plays a role because when I am busy, everyone would take care of and teach my child on behalf of me.”

From the interviews, it is clear that the grandparents, most often the in-laws, assume a significant role in the childrearing process both for the child and the parents. They are not only helping the mothers with domestic work but also actively shaping the development of the child, especially when the mothers return to work. My findings demonstrate that the informants’ motherhood experience is strongly shaped by the involvement of the grandparents rather than the fathers. Phrased differently, the task of mothering in these middle-class families is not limited to the mothers as it includes assistance from the grandparents.

Although most of the informants appreciate the assistance from the grandparents, nine out of ten encounter clashes due to generational differences. While no serious conflicts were reported, disagreements do arise when discussing general issues related to the child. Only one mother, Van, says that her parents-in-law never disagree with her ways of doing things and completely trust her. It is commonly understood in the Vietnamese society that the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law can lead to tensions due to the patrilocal residential pattern (Werner, 2009: 135). However, my findings suggest that even for those living with their

biological parents, tensions can still happen when it comes to childrearing. Some mothers have expressed extreme discontentment due to the grandparents' interference with their parenting. Van describes an incident where she became frustrated with her parents' intervention:

“Yes, we disagree a lot. For example, when my parents think something is okay and let it be but I think it's not okay because that's spoiling the child. Or when I wanted to wean my child a certain way but my parents thought that my child is not ready for it.”

Lack of access to information is commonly stated as the main reason why the two generations clash when it comes to parenting methods. The informants claim that they differ from their previous generation because they know how to make use of technology and enrich their parenting knowledge by absorbing information from all possible channels. All mothers report that they have prepared for childbirth and parenting by reading online, going to prenatal courses at the hospital or reading books. The internet for these mothers not only functions as a business tool but also as a communication channel for their mothering needs and inquiries. Several of my informants report that they have used different Facebook groups and mother sites to seek child-related information both before and after childbirth. Trang elaborates on the generational clash as follows:

“It is obvious that there will be disagreement, a lot of disagreement. That's because the mentality differs from generation to generation. Science advances everyday so the grandparents cannot catch up with it but instead keep applying what they know from the past and also like to copy what others are doing so disagreement is unavoidable.”

It can be understood that frictions were considered to stem from the grandparents' stubbornness to adapt to new knowledge and unwillingness to allow the mothers freedom in childrearing. As one mother put it: “my child, their grandchild” - the mothers are never free to decide how they should parent because the grandparents will always be an integral part in the child's development. These conflicts are best understood through a Bourdieusian lense. These middle-class mothers have a strong belief that they are endowed with cultural and social capital: being able to use the internet, distinguish and consult knowledgeable doctors, find high quality children products and acquire knowledge on different childrearing methods. At the same time,



the informants consider their parents and parents-in-law as members of a different generation with less capital and therefore, assert that the mother remains the most appropriate parenting figure for the child.

What then are the social expectations of good mothering in the eyes of the family members? The informants list a number of aspects concerning the wellbeing of the child as the indicator for what a good mother is. Although most mothers stated in the previous section that raising the child is a job of several, all informants responded to the question of a good mother by describing the importance of being omnipresent in the child's life rather than to include the father in the process.

When asked if the mothers ever received compliments or words of encouragement from families or friends for their devotion as a parent, only one mom did. Anh replies to the question by denying that she was ever a "good" mother (*giỏi*) thus did not deserve to be praised for it. Lien responded to the question by asserting that being a *good* mother is a woman's duty by default according to the general Vietnamese mindset:

"They might say the child is so cute, so white<sup>5</sup> but never say that the mother is so good at raising the child. For Vietnamese people, [a mother] taking care of a child should obviously achieve those results. In the case that the mother cannot meet the expectations of the elderly, then the mother is doing something wrong. (smile) The mentality is that the woman should be able to do such things so there is no need to compliment her for it."

Lien's explanation supports findings by Rydström (2004) and Nguyen (2015) concerning social expectations placed on Vietnamese women to focus on their motherly duties.

Interestingly, none of the mothers are expected by their families to earn an income in order to be considered a good mother. In the interviews, I brought up the term *ăn bám*, to leech off one's spouse or family, to find out the social perception of stay at home moms. Several mothers have heard the term from friends and acquaintances directed towards them but disregard it as a mere

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<sup>5</sup> Being white, as opposed to darker in skin tone, is considered beautiful in Vietnam.

joke. None of the informants had been reminded by their family members to return to work after the child reached a certain milestone. On the contrary, two of the mothers, Mai and Minh, were discouraged to work because their in-laws believed that a mother should always prioritize the child's needs. Such expectations from family and society to focus on the needs of the child echo the ideology of intensive mothering described by Hays (1996) in which care work in the domestic sphere remains a woman's primary responsibility.

The findings of this section demonstrate that the informants' motherhood experience is strongly shaped by their families - specifically, their parents-in-law. Middle-class status has a profound influence on the informants' mothering beliefs and practices in this context. The middle-class' *sense of distinction*, set in the context of a strongly present intergenerational family, shapes the informants' motherhood experience and, in turn, come to motivate their career choices.

### **Work and Motherhood**

It is evident through the informants' accounts that childcare contrasts with employment work in its lack of economic reward, family recognition and social interaction. This section argues that digital entrepreneurial practice is one way in which the informants negotiate their mothering responsibilities and work identity. Motherhood shapes the informants' engagement with entrepreneurship in multiple ways, including: influences their business focus (targeting mothers of young children), presents them as reliable and trustworthy to their customers, and most importantly, instills in them the desire to pursue meaningful work while staying at home.

#### ***The values of work and negotiating motherhood***

Despite the family expectations to invest energy and time into the child, all of my informants believe that the child only needs intensive care from the mother during the first six months of its life. They argue that after this period, the mother should return to work for a number of reasons. Van, whose child is over two years old, had gone to interviews and gotten jobs after the six month leave but eventually decided to stay home and focused on her online business as it was not worth commuting. She tells her perspective on mothering and working:

“I think when the baby is a newborn, the mother must direct all of her energy and attention to care for the baby because the baby is still weak and the mother is the closest person so if the mother has to work, it would be a disadvantage for the baby. So in the first six months, the mother really should focus on the baby and after six months, she could use some help from the grandparents. I’m really lucky that my in-laws do not make me go back to work so I could stay home ever since the baby was born until now.”

Mai asserts that staying at home for too long will lead to her losing her energy and knowledge. Similarly, Chau wanted to return to work as soon as her maternity leave was over:

“I myself think that it is important to resume work because the nature of the job - if I took off for too long, it would be hard for me to catch up when I returned.”

These two mothers both describe serious concern of falling behind at work. For them, working is more than earning an income; it is rather about maintaining their values and identity outside of the domestic sphere. Thu, who runs a medium scale business both online and offline, only took partial maternity leave from her business. She monitored the business from home and resumed work at the physical store just a month after the delivery because she was worried about losing customers if the items were not shipped in a timely fashion. Linh elaborates that if there is no one at home to help out with the baby after the mother has been home for six or seven months then “the mother would have to sacrifice a bit to stay at home and care for the baby.” Her implication here is that work should come first after the six-month maternity leave is over and the mother should only stay home if there are no other possibilities. Phrased differently, these middle-class mothers do not adhere to the selfless intensive mothering ideology expected by family members. They would rather participate in full-time employment as it provides them with the opportunity to develop their own values, self-esteem and identity. This corroborates research on toy consumption among Vietnamese middle-class mothers by Nguyen et al. in which it argues that middle-class mothers no longer uphold intensive mothering practices as work is central to “the modern-woman identity” (2017: 7).

For Lien, going to work is obviously important because it brings in income to support her child and also functions as a platform for personal development of the mother. In other words, employment outside of home serves to enrich one's economic and social capital:

“If you can find a decent job then you should be civilized and send the child to preschool, you would have it easier. When one goes to work, one gets to interact with people among other things.”

Lien's equating delegation of care work to external institutions as a civilized act demonstrates her *sense of distinction* from the stay at home moms, who are implicitly chided in her response as uncultivated. Trang prefers employment work to childcare as she finds caring for a child an extremely demanding job:

“Generally speaking, the job of caring for a child is much harder than going to work. I am going to be straightforward and say that if I had to choose, I would choose going to work and not staying at home with my child. Caring for a child should be seen as a job, even more than a job because it's really strenuous so I just want to send my child to daycare as soon as possible. Even though we have grandma at home, I still want to send my child to daycare because it's just too hard to take care of a child at home.”

It is clear from these accounts that none of the mothers entertain the idea of being stay-at-home moms as they consider work an important part of their lives. Moreover, some mothers also express feelings of incompetence, sometimes hopelessness with their parenting and deem the home environment not stimulating enough for the child's development. Daycare, thus, comes across as the most reasonable solution for the child, the parents and grandparents. Three mothers have already sent their child to daycare or a childminder while three other mothers are preparing to send the kids within a month at the time of the interviews. The other four mothers plan to send their child within a year but two of them do meet resistance from the grandparents. I questioned them about the appropriate age of sending the child to daycare, what effects would daycare have on the child according to the mothers as well as their general feelings of sending the child there. The appropriate age to send the child to daycare ranges between 18 months and 2 years old

according to the informants. Mai currently sends her daughter to a caretaker near her house who also cares for three other children and she has been quite satisfied with this childminder:

“She has 20 year experience taking care of children! Adults at home could only carry her around 24/24 but this lady takes care of 3 other kids so my daughter has friends to play with. Only this lady could feed my daughter, she eats a full bowl of porridge at her place. At home, my daughter would rather fast! She also cries for the TV but at daycare, the lady does not allow the kids to watch TV so it’s much better.”

Almost all informants believe that the daycare environment has many benefits and can solve many of the current issues that the mothers are facing at home. Lien, Van and Anh also believe that daycare can do what they cannot at home: turn a naughty child into a well disciplined one and speed up the talking process. Lien concludes that if a mother finds a good daycare, she should send her child as early as she could because it helps the child become less shy, learn more skills and “the teachers have a better pedagogical method than the mother” which would give the child a better routine. Trang elaborates her expectations of daycare as follows:

“The pros are that my child will be more independent, not so clingy with us and with an environment full of interactions with other kids, my child will learn how to talk faster. The teachers at daycare will also train some good habits such as eating with a spoon, waking up on time, putting the toys back among other things that we as parents find it very hard to teach her because she thinks she could just throw a fit and she would get it.”

In addition to all the benefits mentioned above, daycare also allows the mothers to return to their working life and in some cases, it frees the mothers from the strenuous task of mothering. Minh will have to return to her teaching job full time due to the upcoming provincial competition<sup>6</sup> therefore sending the child to daycare would be the most sensible option for both the mother and the child. Trang believes that she would feel more comfortable once her child attends daycare:

“I want my child at daycare as soon as possible, good for him and good for myself. I have time to do things and my child will have friends among other things.”

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<sup>6</sup> Thuy works as a geography teacher at a middle school so her tasks include and not limited to preparing the students in the elite group for the annual provincial competition in the subject.

Van is also very eager to have her child at daycare and hopes that he will adapt well to the environment so that she could work more productively. From these responses, it can be understood that the informants do not feel strongly about staying at home to care for the child in the same way the Singaporean mumpreneurs do. According to Göransson, the Singaporean moms assume all the tasks related to the child's academic development while often leaving domestic work to maids because the mothers personally feel that they are more qualified than the maids when it comes to educational tasks. My interviews with these 10 Vietnamese middle-class mothers demonstrate almost the opposite - many of these mothers feel not as competent and they have a strong determination to maintain their work identity. Therefore, these Vietnamese mothers with their economic capital, are more likely to delegate the care work to daycare personals when the time comes.

### ***Mumpreneurs or not?***

This section examines the informants' engagement with digital entrepreneurship and how their motherhood experience has influenced their career choice. Four out of ten informants in this study run their online businesses full time and two of these four mothers also have physical stores with employees in which they come and stay several hours everyday to make sure everything runs smoothly. One mother recently quit her job to move to another city so the online business can be seen as a "part-time gig" in the words of the informant. The other five consider their online businesses to be a left-hand occupation since they are employed between half to full-time outside of home. Although all of the mothers are engaged with digital entrepreneurship, they started their businesses at different points in life and for different reasons. Four of my informants had been running online businesses prior to the birth of their babies thus the term *mumpreneur*, defined as someone who configured her business around her caring role, does not technically apply to them (Ekinsmyth, 2014: 1231). However, I would argue that these mothers are in certain respects, *mumpreneurs* as they all continue to work with their businesses after having children and take advantages of their roles as mothers for business purposes. Many claim that their online businesses have given them the possibilities to accomplish meaningful goals that they would otherwise not able to achieve in another setting. In other words, a Vietnamese

*mumpreneur*, or *mẹ bím sũa kinh doanh* is a mother who runs her own business out of her own will (as opposed to *forced entrepreneurship*) as a means to fulfill certain goals both in the domestic sphere and outside of home.

Though they are all *mumpreneurs* according to my definition, only three mothers identified strongly with the term for business reason. Thu started her Facebook business as an extension to her physical shop under the name *Suri Online Shop* in 2016 and nicknamed herself on Facebook as Suri's mom. Her Facebook business demonstrates her clear intention in branding herself as a *mumpreneur* as she explains in the interview that moms often buy from moms so as a mother herself who has the opportunity to travel abroad, she would attract many potential clients who are also mothers looking to purchase the best products for their children. Similarly, Minh and Mai have mothers as their targeted customers so by highlighting their identity as *mumpreneurs*, they can gain trust and confidence from the buyers who are also mothers.

Nonetheless, regardless of their identity as *mumpreneur* or not, all of my Vietnamese informants share common motivations for their engagement in digital entrepreneurship. They want to take part in meaningful work that would generate extra income, expand one's social network, build up confidence and to a certain extent, help them claim their authority at home. I would argue that it is precisely the middle-class consumption pattern and capital that allow for this meaningful work to take place. As one of my informants, Mai, argues:

“Working-class people don't dare to invest in businesses. They are only interested in working for others, receiving a chunk of money every month and playing it safe. They rarely do business which requires financial capital and hard work. Unlike me, I am always interested in investing in new products which are lesser known and trying to make them a success.”

### ***Digital entrepreneurship as meaningful work***

None of the mothers in my study had trouble returning to their previous jobs after giving birth. Those six mothers who started their online businesses after childbirth all claim that they did not necessarily do so because of the child but rather because of their interest in earning extra money by trying something that can be done from home while they care for the baby. In other words,

their children might be the reason that they had to stay home from work and served as inspiration for their choice of investment but not the motivation that led them to create their businesses. All of these middle-class mothers are *opportunity entrepreneurs* who engaged themselves out of choice as opposed to *necessity entrepreneurs* who actually needed the financial gains from the venture (Nguyen et al., 2014: 55). The main motivation according to my informants is a strong desire to do meaningful work (*việc làm có ích*). Meaningful work in the Vietnamese context denotes both for others as well as self-fulfillment. My Vietnamese informants see their online businesses mainly as means to satisfy their interests, to bring in extra saving, to socialize with others, to enrich their knowledge, and most importantly to validate their capability to earn an income.

One visible benefit of online entrepreneurship cited by some mothers is the absence of physical space. This means that they are not limited to a place and time which they have to be present to do their work. The mothers put up in-stock items, communicate with customers, survey customers' interests and advertise upcoming items online through Facebook, Viber and/or Zalo. Their inventories are advertised primarily on their own Facebook walls but can also be found in different Buy and Sell Facebook groups such as *Hội các bà mẹ bỉm sữa kinh doanh*, *Hội các bà mẹ bỉm sữa buôn bán*<sup>7</sup>. Groups such as those mentioned above boast 61,000 and 330,000 members respectively. The orders are either delivered to the customers' homes or to be picked up at the sellers' houses. If they could not tend to the customers, their family members would assist them on their behalf. The absence of a physical location also means fewer costs to the business such as rent, electricity and general store maintenance.

While most mothers expressed general interest in entrepreneurship, some have specific hobbies that they wanted to turn into a business. Thu has always been into arts and fashion so her business took shape of a clothing boutique in which she designed and sold a new collection every season. After her daughter was born, she also created a sub-shop selling exported clothing items for children. Lien has a passion for food, especially baking so she mostly make cakes for

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<sup>7</sup> The two groups can be translated to “Diaper and milk moms who do business group” and “ Diaper and milk moms buy and sell group” respectively.



birthdays and occasionally, seasonal holiday snacks. Trang has a keen interest in beauty products so she imports these items in bulk for personal use and sells the remaining to reduce import cost while still make a profit.

When asked apart from the monetary gain, what else does the business contribute to their personal growth, most of the mothers cited the possibility to connect and socialize with their clients. Trang remarked that her business gave her the opportunity to reconnect with old friends that she would otherwise never have time to speak to since she became a mother. She stated that motherhood had minimized her social circle as it consumed so much of her time thus the online business has a positive impact for her. Likewise, Anh commented on the positive aspects of her business:

“[It brings] happiness and in my free time, doing business is meaningful and [makes me] feel more comfortable. Happy because everyday I get to chat with other moms, helping each other sell things while exchanging knowledge on child-rearing.”

Similarly, Minh perceived her job to be something liberating:

“Those first days staying home, going in and out with the baby felt really stucked, and (tù túng). But after [I] started working, having to go out to ship the orders or when the customers come, I could sit and chat with the mothers, exchange with them about how their children are eating?”

For some mothers, the business became an idea after they had to order imported items for their babies and they realized that it would benefit both them and others if they made a sizeable bulk purchase. Minh while wanted the best products for her child, found the cost of ordering an item at a time to be too pricy so she came up with the idea of ordering bulk and introducing these useful products to others. Likewise, Thu and her friend recognized that a business catering to the needs of mothers was a necessity where she lives after many mothers showed interests in the baby formula that Thu’s friend purchased for her son. Thu has always been active in researching new bestsellers to diversify her inventory because she wants to be the first to introduce products or one of the few to informally monopolize on certain items. Chau, who expanded her business from mother and child products to cosmetics, fashion watches and glasses, supplement pills, also

expressed a sense of achievement when her customers are satisfied with their purchases. These mothers also cite knowledge as a benefit they acquired from the job due to having to constantly updating themselves with information for consultation. Using Bourdieu's critique on strategies of *distinction*, it is clear that entrepreneurial practice is a convenient way for these mothers to show their clients that their class worth and define what good taste entails (Seymour, 2004: 7).

Among my informants, only one mother, Thu, earns a considerable profit from her business which after daily expenses for the family, business investment and saving, she could purchase her car and finance her traveling. For the other nine informants, their online businesses generate from very little money on the side to enough to pay for half of the family expenses. For most of the mothers I interviewed, entrepreneurship helps validate their capability to earn an income even when the amount is insignificant. Since six of my informants started their businesses during their maternity leaves, the motivation was to maximize efficiency from home. They simply did not want to be stay at home moms without an income despite the fact that a few of them receive paid-compensation for their leaves. For those who were not eligible for paid leaves, the incentive to run a business is even higher. These findings suggest that the informants exhibit a strong *sense of distinction* with their entrepreneurial practice as they seek to differentiate themselves from the stay at home mothers who depend completely on their husbands (Seymour, 2004: 8).

Minh had some health issues during her pregnancy which led her to stay home from work months before she delivered. Although no one commented on it, she herself felt as if she was leeching off her husband. Minh specifically used the term *ăn bám* (leeching off) to describe her self-consciousness of not earning an income and having to depend on others financially. However, she quickly regain her positiveness through her business:

“The business makes me feel more comfortable. For example, people can acknowledge that I still earn money even when I am home or that I could spend more comfortably, not having to ask my husband everytime I want to purchase something.”

She added that her in-laws also had a more positive view towards her as she brought in extra income. Mai explained that before she started working, she felt inept when comparing herself to others who had jobs:

“After I got married and gave birth, I stayed at home because my family did not like it when I had to commute to work and back. But when I heard my friends earning seven to eight millions a month, I felt embarrassed, that I only stayed home instead of working and earning money, [I] felt incompetent.”

Similar to Minh, Mai referred to her feeling while staying home as *ăn bám* and felt a lack of respect from everyone for having to ask her husband for money. After she started working, her job helped her prove her own worth:

“If I just stay home, I would just think I am not as good as everyone else. But if I go out, meet new people, I feel happier and that I am quite capable.”

Mai takes great pride in being *bà mẹ bim sũa kinh doanh*, or in my proposed definition, *mumpreneur*, as she often posts on her Facebook about successes of her mumpreneur friends and seeks to recruit other moms who are interested in entrepreneurship. She explicitly refers to herself and her friends as *các bà mẹ bim sũa kinh doanh* who can earn just as much or even more than their spouses just by working from home *while* also managing *motherhood*. Mai implies in her posts that the *mumpreneur identity* is her way of proving that a mother can also be smart and competent in domains outside of home. Mai is not the only mother to stress the power in earning more money than her spouse. Linh argued that earning more money than her husband would give her more say in everyday matters. In this regard, being a super mother could help them claim authority in the domestic sphere.

Overall, most of the family members either support or have minimum say in the mothers' businesses. The assistance they receive ranging from caring for the child to caring for the clients in the form of delivering the goods to the homes or managing the orders at their “ware”house. Only two mothers, Mai and Minh, received complaints from their family members for overworking and neglecting their babies. At one point, Minh put her business on hold to focus on

her baby but that did not last long because she felt uneasy from not working. These three accounts illustrate that being a mumpreneur can improve mothers' self-esteem by validating their roles as income earners in the family - despite the fact that no family members demand this from them. Since Leung's study on Japanese mumpreneurs omits the mothers' perspectives on the values of work, it is difficult to draw a comparison with the Vietnamese case in this study in this aspect. The only point of comparison concerns the institutional context of motherhood and work. Whereas the notion of a working mother is not encouraged in Japan, it is expected of the Vietnamese women. Thus the motivation for being a mumpreneur in Japan contrasts with that of the Vietnamese mumpreneur. Turning to Göransson's study of Singaporean middle-class mothers, my data is consistent with Göransson's findings on the meaning of work for these women. Göransson points out that being mumpreneur is essential to the mothers she interviewed as it "reflects these women's identity as well educated and capable of having a professional career" (2016). Differently put, doing entrepreneurship plays a vital role for the mothers in this study by providing them with the opportunity to socialize while at the same, allowing them to appear visibly to their family members as the capable, motivated and busy working mother.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

In this study, I have attempted to shed light on the construction of motherhood and the practices of mothering in ten middle-class families in Northern Vietnam. In doing so, the thesis seeks to answer how the motherhood experience influences middle-class mothers to become *mumpreneurs*. I have argued for an alternative meaning of *mumpreneur*, defining her as a mother who does business out of her own will as a means to attain goals both within and outside of the domestic sphere.

My findings illustrate that family, specifically the husband and the couple's parents, has strong influence on the experience of motherhood. They serve as the main motivation for the informants to have children. Parents and parents-in-law also assist mothers after childbirth. Nevertheless, the role of the fathers in the childrearing process remains minor.

Following Bourdieu's notion of class *habitus*, I argue that the informants' mothering beliefs and practices are also shaped by their middle-class status. The informants' consumption patterns align with Bourdieu's analysis of the middle-class as *class of distinction* in which they seek to demonstrate that they have the appropriate taste for their class. Moreover, such *sense of distinction* is apparent in their aspirations for their children's future. Many are interested in enrolling their children in refined hobbies such as art and music. Other informants speak of sending the child abroad or to a more prestigious school to distance themselves from the mediocrity that the local school system has to offer. It is implied through their accounts that being a middle-class mother means to ensure that the child will grow up to be nothing less than the parents, if not, better.

Bourdieu's *sense of distinction* reemerges in discussion on intergenerational conflict. Although the mothers in the study rely on the child's grandparents for support, they find it difficult to tolerate the grandparents' childrearing style. The informants believe that they are endowed with more cultural and social capital than their in-laws or parents, thus, are more capable of the parenting task than the previous generation.

Regarding social expectations, the in-laws tend to expect the informants to practice intensive mothering in which the child's needs should be prioritized. Phrased differently, the mothers in this study are not expected to earn an income but rather to stay home to focus on the child. The informants, on the other hand, are not willing to invest all of their time and energy, especially after the first six months as childcare does not generate economic capital, social recognition or meaningful interaction. Instead, employment outside of home is perceived to be crucial for their sense of self-worth and identity. As a result, all informants have integrated digital entrepreneurship in their mothering routines as a means to negotiate motherhood and work. As *mumpreneurs*, they can fulfill both their heavenly duties as mothers and their quest for meaningful work. The *habitus* of digital entrepreneurship has given the informants the opportunity to increase their economic capital, enrich their social capital and most importantly, validate their capability. To engage in entrepreneurship, for the informants, is to distinguish

themselves from the stay at home mothers who depend on their spouses for their everyday spending. Moreover, following Bourdieusian thinking, entrepreneurial practice can be thought to be a way in which the informants come to establish to their clients what good taste constitutes.

In conclusion, the motherhood experience has impacted the informants' career choice in decisive ways. Through changes in daily routine and new patterns of consumption, motherhood opened up a new way of thinking about work for the informants and as the result, led to the incorporation of digital entrepreneurship into their mothering practice.

While my thesis is an in-depth study of ten individual cases, the findings could be used to draw inference on a similar group in another context, for example, middle-class mumpreneurs in Southern Vietnam and compare how regional differences can impact the motherhood experience and engagement with entrepreneurship. Further research could be conducted to assess challenges that mumpreneurs face in pursuing their career and attitude of family members, specifically the father, towards parenting and work.

## **Appendix 1 - Information about the Informants<sup>8</sup>**

Mai, 25 year old, originally from Hai Duong province but moved to Hanoi for higher education and married an old classmate of the interviewer from Hanoi. The couple has a 14 month old daughter and the family lives with the husband's parents. Mai's parents moved to Europe with her two siblings a few years ago so she has only 2 sisters and extended family in Vietnam. She attended a state university majoring in Business Administration. She currently runs a business selling natural beauty products using Facebook as the main tool for communication.

Minh, 26 year old, originally from Hoa Binh but moved to Hanoi for university majoring in secondary education pedagogy (year 6 to 12) with a specialization in Geography. She later moved back to Hoa Binh to be close to her family and married a man from Hoa Binh. She was introduced to the interviewer through a mutual friend. The couple lives with the husband's family and has a son. She works in the morning as a Geography teacher at a secondary school and spends the rest of the day at home with her child and taking care of her online business through Facebook.

Linh, 25 year old, born and raised in Hanoi and is an old classmate of the interviewer. She married a man whose family lives only 10 minutes away from her house. The couple has a 14 month old son and lives with the husband's family most of the week and spends the weekends at Linh's parents. Linh has a bachelor degree in accounting from a Vietnamese state university. She currently works at the customer service section of a big department store in Hanoi but only in shifts. She also runs an online business through Facebook selling traveling deals, cosmetics among other things.

Lien, 33 year old, born and raised in Hanoi and is the older sister of an old classmate of the interviewer. She is a single mother to a 20 month old son and currently both live with Lien's parents, her sister, Hoa and Hoa's 27 month old son. Lien has a bachelor degree in accounting and works as an accountant. Lien's case is interesting because apart from her accounting job and her own bakery business, she also assisted Hoa with her online business. Hoa, however, stopped doing online business about 5 months ago and now focuses solely on her job at a real estate agent. Since Hoa split up with her partner, it is Lien and her parents who care for Hoa's child while she's away on business trips.

Trang, 30 year old, born in Bac Giang but moved to Hanoi for school and work. She has a bachelor and a masters degree in development economics. The interviewer came to know about

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<sup>8</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

the informant through a relative who studied with Trang. Trang has a 16 month old daughter and they had just moved to Ho Chi Minh City when the interviewer got a hold of the informant. Prior to the move, they lived in their own apartment in Hanoi and Trang had worked at different companies up until the birth of her daughter. The reason for Trang starting the online business was because she couldn't find a good place to purchase cosmetics thus the sensible thing was to start her own online business to save the cost of importing cosmetics for personal use.

Nhung, 26 year old, born and raised in Hanoi and has a 14 month old daughter. She currently lives with her husband's family in downtown Hanoi but frequently visits her parents who also live downtown. Nhung studied at a fashion college in Hanoi. Nhung currently runs her own fashion house in downtown Hanoi and online. When she was on maternity leave, Nhung did run an online business selling children's clothing but since it did not generate as much profit as she had wanted, she discontinued the business and focuses now on her design work.

Van, 27 year old, born and raised in Hanoi and has a 25 month old son. She currently lives with her parents and child in Hanoi. The couple has their own apartment but she felt more comfortable living with her parents so Van's husband actually lives at the apartment alone. Van has a degree in Business Management from a Vietnamese state university. Van has been working with her online business since her child turned one and does not have a second job. The interviewer got her contact through a mutual friend who purchases from Van.

Thu, 32 year old, grew up in Thai Nguyen but moved to Germany when she was 14. She came back to Vietnam when she was 23. She has since then lived in Lao Cai City. She has a 19 month old child and lives with her parents in law. She completed a program in Hotel Management at a vocational school in Germany and worked at several hotels in Lao Cai after moving back. Together with a close friend, Thu started a business focusing on baby products and soon moved the business online. She now runs her own business full time. The informant is a friend of the interviewer's relative.

Anh, 22 year old, grew up in Hanoi but later married someone from Hai Phong so she moved to Hai Phong and is currently living with her in-law family. The couple has a 18 month old child. Anh works as a spa specialist and runs the online business at the same time. She started the online business after she gave birth to earn some income while on maternity leave. The informant studied Finance at a university in Bac Ninh. The interviewer found the informant in a Facebook group for breastfeeding mothers in Vietnam.

Chau, 26 year old, grew up in Hai Duong but moved to Hanoi for high school and university. She is now living in Hai Duong with her husband and twin babies who are 7 month old. Chau majored in finance and banking and her decision to start the online business is partly because of



being on maternity leave and partly because she was interested in business. She has recently resumed her daytime office job also in the business sector. The informant was a former classmate of the interviewer's friend.

## **Appendix 2 - Interview Questions**

### **A. Basic background information**

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your family? \*age \*baby
2. Where did you grow up?
3. Are you currently living with your in-law or your own apartment or your parents'? If not with your parents, how far away do they live from you?
4. Which program or course did you read after your high school graduation?

### **B. Being a middle class mother in Vietnam**

1. Since the delivery until now, do you think life has changed much for you and in what ways?
2. According to you, what does mothering mean/include? Did you read books, participate in forums before and after giving birth to prepare for childrearing? Do you feel confident mothering?
3. According to you, who should play the main role in childrearing? The mother/father/grandparents or the combination of two or all of the above?
4. Do you get help taking care of your child? For example, your spouse, your mother, your mother-in-law or a domestic helper? When your child is sick or doesn't eat, who do you contact for assistance/guidance?
5. Do you plan to send your child to a preschool in the near future? When do you think is the appropriate age to send your child to preschool? According to you, how does the preschool affect your child both positively and negatively? If your child goes to preschool, how will you feel about it?
6. Do you often think about the future of your child for example, where should your child attend primary school or which extra curricular activities s/he should take part in when s/he is older?
7. When talking about the development of your child, what is the most important thing according to you? In other words, as a mother what do you wish your child would achieve?

### **C. Mothering through the perspectives of families and acquaintances in Vietnam**

1. Do you and your family members often agree or disagree about childrearing methods? Why is that?

2. Do you have the feeling that your family members and acquaintances judge your ways of caring for your child (nursing vs. bottle feeding, puree vs. blw, how to dress the baby)? If so, why?
3. What do you think is the general Vietnamese social concept of mothering? Why should a woman be a mother?
4. What does good mothering look like according to your family? Typical sentences they repeat or say often to you when speaking about the child?
5. Does your family compliment you for being a good mother or console you when something happens?
6. Does the sex of your child matter for your family?

#### **D. Mothering while working**

1. What time does your spouse leave for work and when does he come home currently?
2. Do you think that a mother of a small child should go to work and earn money or caring for the child is a job in itself and must be respected?
3. Did you and your spouse discuss everyday life's responsibilities while expecting the baby and after the baby was born?
4. Who in your family makes decisions?
5. Why did you choose to do online business? Do you plan to change your job when your child enters primary school?
6. Do you do business online to support the family financial situation with bills (food, gas, internet, electricity) or do you have bigger plans (buying house, car, investment, traveling)?
7. Apart from having an income, what else does your business bring you?
8. How do your spouse and your family feel about your business? Does your husband also want to take part in your online business (help with promotion, marketing) or does he want to start his own online business?
9. Have you heard of the term "leeching off" before? What does the term mean to you? Has anyone you know used the term to describe you/your child?
10. How do you feel about your current job? Do you think it's important to earn the same or more money than your spouse?

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#### **A. Câu hỏi sơ lược**

1. Bạn có thể giới thiệu một chút về bản thân và gia đình của bạn được không?
2. Bạn sinh ra và lớn lên ở đâu vậy?
3. Bạn hiện tại đang sống cùng gia đình nhà chồng, ở riêng hay ở cùng bố mẹ đẻ của bạn? Nếu bạn không ở cùng bố mẹ đẻ, bố mẹ ruột của bạn ở cách bạn bao xa?

4. Sau khi tốt nghiệp phổ thông, bạn có tham gia vào chương trình cao đẳng hay đại học không?

### **B. Làm mẹ trung lưu ở Việt Nam**

1. Từ lúc sinh con tới hiện tại, bạn thấy cuộc sống có thay đổi nhiều không và thay đổi như thế nào?
2. Đối với bạn, làm mẹ bao gồm những gì? Bạn có đọc sách, tham gia diễn đàn trước và sau khi sinh con để chuẩn bị thông tin nuôi con không? Bạn có cảm thấy tự tin khi làm mẹ không?
3. Theo bạn thì ai nên đóng vai trò chính trong việc nuôi dạy con cái? Mẹ/bố/ông bà hay là sự kết hợp của hai hoặc tất cả những nhân vật trên?
4. Có ai giúp bạn trong việc chăm con không? Ví dụ như chồng bạn, mẹ bạn, mẹ chồng bạn hoặc người giúp việc? Khi con ốm hoặc biếng ăn thì bạn sẽ liên lạc với ai để được trợ giúp?
5. Bạn có dự định gửi bé đi trẻ trong tương lai gần không? Khi bé mấy (tháng) tuổi theo bạn thì phù hợp đi học ở nhà trẻ? Theo bạn thì nhà trẻ có ảnh hưởng như thế nào tới con bạn (cả tích cực và tiêu cực)? Nếu bé đi trẻ thì bạn sẽ cảm thấy thế nào?
6. Bạn có hay suy nghĩ về tương lai sau này của con ví dụ như con nên đi học cấp 1 ở trường nào hay nên tham gia hoạt động ngoại khoá gì khi con lớn hơn?
7. Theo bạn thì điều gì quan trọng nhất khi nói đến sự phát triển của con bạn? Nói cách khác, là một người mẹ bạn muốn con đạt được điều gì nhất?

### **C. “Làm mẹ” qua cách nhìn của gia đình và người quen ở Việt Nam**

1. Bạn và gia đình hay đồng ý hay không đồng ý về các phương pháp chăm sóc trẻ nhỏ? Vì sao?
2. Theo bạn cảm nhận, gia đình và người quen (hàng xóm hay bạn bè) có đánh giá bạn khi bạn làm mẹ (ví dụ sữa mẹ hay sữa bột, ăn dặm truyền thống hay con tự chỉ huy, cách mặc quần áo cho con)? Nếu có thì vì sao?
3. Theo bạn thì trong quan niệm xã hội của người Việt nói chung và của gia đình bạn nói riêng, vì sao người phụ nữ lại phải làm mẹ?
4. Theo gia đình bạn (gia đình chồng và bố mẹ ruột của bạn) làm mẹ tốt thì phải như thế nào? (hy sinh? hay nói gì với bạn khi nhắc đến con)
5. Bạn có bao giờ được gia đình khen là bạn là một người mẹ khéo/giỏi hay an ủi bạn khi bạn buồn?
6. Giới tính của con trong gia đình bạn có quan trọng không?

### **D. Vừa làm mẹ vừa làm việc**

1. Hiện tại chồng bạn thường đi làm lúc mấy giờ và về lúc mấy giờ?

2. Theo bạn thì một người mẹ có con nhỏ có nhất thiết phải việc kiếm tiền không hay bản thân việc nuôi con ở nhà là một công việc độc lập và phải được tôn trọng?
3. Bạn và chồng mình có thảo luận/phân chia công việc hàng ngày (chăm con, đi làm, dọn dẹp nhà cửa, chợ búa) trước khi sinh con? Và sau khi sinh bé?
4. Trong gia đình bạn thì ai là người ra quyết định?
5. Vì sao bạn chọn kinh doanh qua mạng làm công việc? Bạn có định thay đổi công việc khi con đi học cấp 1 không?
6. Việc kinh doanh của bạn mục đích chính là để phụ giúp tài chính gia đình (chợ, xăng, điện internet) hay để tiết kiệm cho những việc lớn hơn (mua nhà, xe, du lịch hoặc đầu tư)?
7. Ngoài việc làm là một nguồn thu nhập, bạn cảm thấy việc làm còn đem lại điều gì cho bạn?
8. Gia đình bạn và gia đình chồng bạn có cảm nghĩ gì khi bạn làm kinh doanh qua mạng? Chồng bạn có muốn tham gia kinh doanh cùng bạn (hỗ trợ quảng cáo tiếp thị) hay tự mở doanh nghiệp riêng qua mạng không?
9. Bạn đã từng nghe cụm từ “ăn bám” chưa? Bạn hiểu cụm từ đó như thế nào? Đã có ai bạn biết sử dụng cụm từ trên với bạn chưa?
10. Bản thân bạn cảm thấy công việc hiện tại của mình như thế nào? Việc kiếm tiền bằng hoặc nhiều hơn chồng có quan trọng đối với bạn không?

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