The Politics of Digitizing Art and Culture in Vietnam: A Case Study on Matca Space of Photography in Hanoi

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Abstract. The nature of work in the art and cultural sector in Hanoi, Vietnam, is changing. The new generation of cultural professionals is harnessing digital technology to display art and cultural collections in innovative and creative ways. Digitization today is not only about creating ‘hidden’ digital archives but, instead, about curating digital art and culture experiences that are publicly accessible. This allows a way to preserve culture, which can be digitally displayed in a contemporary format. The paper presents findings from a case study on Matca Space for Photography (Matca), including semi-structured interviews, secondary data analysis, and a digital ethnography of Matca’s digital platforms. The current study highlights the challenges and opportunities associated with digitization in Vietnam. While there are challenges with digitization due to a lack of technical resources and human resources, using digital platforms can allow cultural professionals an agency to present Vietnamese art and culture to local and international audiences. This has the potential to redress the imbalance in representation and redefine digital orientalism.

Keywords: Digitization · Art and cultural sector · Vietnam

1 Introduction

This paper investigates the current nature of digitization in the art and cultural sector in Hanoi, Vietnam. It will use a case study on one particular non-profit, independent art organization in Hanoi, Matca Space for Photography (Matca), in order to show how cultural professionals are digitizing their art collections and how they are utilizing digital platforms to publicly display these collections. The last five years have seen the uptake of digital technologies for the digitization of collections in Hanoi. However, the art and culture sector is only just beginning to utilize digital platforms for the public display of art collections. Even though digitization itself is not a new phenomenon, the digital technologies that are being used to publicly display these digitized collections today are new. Moreover, the transformation this is having on the work of Vietnamese cultural professionals is also new.

The current state of the creative industries across Asia, including China, Japan and South Korea is well-documented in the literature [12, 14, 15, 20] and, more specifically,
in relation to other countries in South East Asia, such as Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia [4, 6, 28]. However, Vietnam seems to have been left out of this discourse. Importantly, the Vietnamese government has now positioned the creative industries as a major sector for national development and for international cooperation [18, 26]. However, there is a need to assess the role of digital technology in the creative industries in Vietnam, as this transition and development is helping to transform the nation’s image from ‘Made in Vietnam’ to ‘designed, innovated and created in Vietnam’. This generation of cultural professionals is showcasing this new national image by harnessing digital technologies, including digital tools, apps and platforms.

It is important to investigate the opportunities and challenges of digitization that cultural professionals are facing in Vietnam. In particular, research is required on the take-up of digital technologies for preserving and displaying art and cultural collections in Hanoi. On one hand, digitization provides a means of sustainable preservation and can provide a way to overcome issues to do with archiving and preserving cultural heritage. It can also allow cultural professionals an agency to present Vietnamese art and culture to local and international audiences. This has the potential to redress the imbalance in representation and to redefine digital orientalism, which exists in the differing amounts of content available online, the quality of content due to level of access to high-quality technologies and algorithms that perpetuate bias towards content from the West. However, on the other hand, there are challenges in terms of human resources and technical resources, such as the need for skilled professionals dedicated to this role and equipment that can be used to properly digitize artworks.

The research uses a case study on Matca in order to investigate how they use digitized content to curate their digital platforms (website and Facebook page), how digitization can be a sustainable solution for the precarities they face in their work (lack of funding, technical resources and human resources), and how digital display can provide a way to regain control of the narrative on Vietnamese photography. This case study is significant in demonstrating the broader transition towards digitization of art and culture in Hanoi, as Matca is at the forefront in utilizing digital technologies to display their photography collections, in using digital platforms for displaying Vietnamese photography and in building a community of dialogue and critique both locally and internationally.

The two hypotheses of the current study are as follows:

1) There have been many developments in digitization over the last five years in Hanoi, but there are country-specific challenges due to lack of funding, human resources and technical resources that are impeding developments in digitization.
2) Digitization and digital display allow Vietnamese cultural professionals to regain control over the narrative on Vietnamese art and culture.

The two research questions of the current study are as follows:

1) What are the opportunities and challenges in digitizing art and cultural collections for Matca Space for Photography?
2) How are Vietnamese cultural professionals using digitization and digital display in order to present their narrative on contemporary Vietnamese art and culture?
2 Methods

2.1 Methodology

The current study used an ‘explanatory’ case study by exploring “cause-effect relationships and how events happen[ed]” [27]. The case study was carried out between January and September 2020. Due to the length of time and specificity on one organization, the case study approach provided an in-depth and detailed understanding of Matca’s current state of digitization and how they are digitally displaying this work. The case study approach provided a way of understanding the developments and challenges Matca is currently facing in the process of digitization. This highlights a politics of digitization that is specific to Vietnam.

A range of methods were used in the case study in order to triangulate the results and to provide more breadth. “While it offers depth and specificity, case study research also offers breadth and diversity in terms of methods of data collection and analytical techniques” [2]. This case study included semi-structured interviews, secondary data analysis, and a digital ethnography of Matca’s digital platforms. The data was then analyzed from each method of data collection. After data analysis, the findings were combined in order to deduce key themes. “This offer[ed] the possibility of several different layers of analysis which [could] reveal several different perspectives, with the added benefit of triangulation of the results” [2].

By using interviews, digital ethnography and secondary data analysis over a nine month period (January–September 2020), the case study identified how Matca is digitizing its collections and the challenges in undertaking digitization projects, such as utilizing search engine optimization for their digital platforms. More broadly, the case study identified the effects of digitization on representation, curation and preservation of art and culture in Hanoi. It also highlighted the precarious nature of work in the art and cultural sector today, especially for an independent, non-for-profit art organisation. This is a timely case study, as it also revealed how art organisations have been effected by the COVID-19 pandemic and how this has changed the pace of and the way of digitizing collections.

2.2 Data Collection

The case study included three modes of data collection:

(1) Semi-structured interviews with Matca and other art organizations in Hanoi
(2) Digital ethnography of Matca’s website and Facebook page
(3) Secondary data analysis on Matca

Three semi-structured interviews were carried out with the co-founders of Matca. These took place in January, June and July 2020. Pseudonyms are used in this paper for the interviewees. The three interviews will be referred to as ‘Interview 1’, ‘Interview 2’ and ‘Interview 3’ in the Results and Discussion section. Twenty semi-structured interviews were also conducted with other art organisations across Hanoi, carried out between May and September 2020, in order to provide context for what Matca is experiencing in terms
of the opportunities and challenges in digitization as well as how they use their digital platforms. The digital ethnography involved collecting data from Matca’s website and Facebook page from March until April 2020. Screenshots were taken of a selection of posts during this time period. Algorithms that are applied to Facebook posts meant that it was not possible to collect all posts during this time period. Posts were selected in relation to three themes: (1) emotion/connection, (2) increased digitization and (3) international connection. This limitation was mitigated by the use of triangulation with other methods. These Facebook posts were then analysed in terms of how they digitized and displayed art as well as how they used their Facebook page to communicate to local and international audiences. Secondary data and publications on Matca were collected and analysed from June until August 2020, including newspaper articles, art and culture magazine articles, past interviews published online with the co-founders and content from their website.

3 Relevant Literature

3.1 The Politics of Digitization in the Art and Cultural Sector

This section addresses the impact of digitization on the curation, preservation and representation of art and culture. A lot of the literature discusses the changes to audience engagement and participation, the changes to art itself and the impact of digitization on the art market [3, 9, 19]. For instance, Abassi, Vassilopoulou and Stergioulas argue that digital technologies have become commonplace in the creative industries, with “new materials, processes and tools for creative practices” [1]. Digital tools allow art spaces to be able to show their collections to audiences globally and to show artworks from past and present exhibitions. However, research is required on the nature of work of cultural professionals, in terms of how their work practices are changing, how they are digitizing their collections and what challenges they are facing in this process.

It is important to look at this in relation to what is happening in a developing country in South East Asia, as a lot is written about in relation to Western countries [5, 17, 21, 25]. The current study will redress this imbalance. Furthermore, it will also include discussion on the challenges of digitization, in response to much of the literature that perceives the shift towards digitization as largely positive [1, 24]. This paper identifies the challenges of digitization, including the lack of funding and resources, issues with the digitization divide and politics of representation over the narrative of Vietnamese art and culture.

Systematic protocols and standard practices need to be put in place in order for digitization to be a sustainable solution for preservation and representation of art and culture in Vietnam. As Fanea-Ivanovici argues, “sustainable digitization” is required and certain requirements are necessary for effective digitization [11]. This is critical in order to avoid a further digitization divide globally. Fanea-Ivanovici considers the need for open-access archives and museum collections so that audiences can have equal access to digital art and cultural content [11]. However, this does not address cultural professionals’ need for equal access to digital technologies. Fanea-Ivanovici argues it is important to discuss this issue in order to ensure a “sustainable and inclusive growth” in
the art and cultural sector [11] and to ensure more equal representation of art and culture globally.

It is important to consider the role of cultural professionals, who become agents in the digital curation of art collections. They can decide which pieces from their collections to publicly display and the themes or narrative they wish to convey. This links to Derrida and Prenowitz who argue that institutions have “the power to interpret the archive” [10]. Digital platforms allow cultural professionals to become mediators of content and to have an agency with which to convey their own narrative on art and culture.

The issue has to do with power over access and representation on a global scale. For instance, the Louvre Museum or the Victoria & Albert Museum can digitally display and make their collections accessible by using the latest digital technologies and employ skilled staff dedicated to this role, due to availability of human resources and funding. This is in contrast to the issues with budget, technical resources and human resources experienced in developing countries such as Vietnam. This can hold back or slow down the digitization process and, hence, further increase the digitization divide. This creates an imbalance in representation in art and culture globally. As Chaumont argues, “preserving becomes the privilege of the hegemony; where technological-advanced countries get to define, choose and provide cultural material for the rest of the world” [9]. This is why it is important to identify what work is being done to digitize and publicly display art and culture in Vietnam and to understand how digitization can provide a way to overcome this imbalance in representation.

3.2 The Current State of Digitization in the Art and Cultural Sector in Vietnam

Across Asia, discussion is taking place on policy around preserving cultural heritage [7, 18, 26]. However, there is very little discussion on digitization processes in Hanoi and still little policy discussion on this area with regards to agreement on professional standards and practices. This is the case even though a lot of art and culture is transitioning to online platforms, being transferred to digital formats and an increasing amount of exhibitions are being held online. Furthermore, while there have been studies on the digital disruption of the design, book publishing, and print industry sectors [5, 21, 25], relatively less has been researched on the art and culture sector. As Miles and Green argue, there are few studies of innovation in the creative industries, especially with regards to technological innovation and the digitization of content that is driving major changes in the creative industries [17].

Digitization projects have been taking place in the art and cultural sector in Hanoi, including scanning images, objects and photographs for preservation or in order to create digital archives. However, these digital archives and collections have not been used for public engagement but, rather, solely for preservation and archiving. For this reason, art and cultural organizations are only just beginning to work on the public display of and access to digitized collections. The collections of many state-run art and cultural institutions in Hanoi are not publicly displayed on a digital platform because the means for digitization onto apps or digital platforms has yet to be utilized effectively. Whereas, independent art organisations have had to innovate in order to survive and so are harnessing digital technologies more readily. There is a need for more provision of access to artworks and artifacts as well as in making it more accessible to the public.
Matca has developed its online platforms for the public digital display of photography, for publishing a photography journal and in order to create a community around photography that connects photographers, curators, researchers and critics in Hanoi, Vietnam and internationally.

This demonstrates that there has been an evolution in the use of digital technologies for work in the creative industries, especially with regards to non-profit art organizations in Hanoi. This case provides evidence of the opening up of multiple channels for international connections as well as for the display, archiving, and distribution of collections. This is allowing a more seamless transition between the initial digitization of content and the public display of content via digital means. This has been accelerated due to the pandemic, as cultural professionals have had to utilize digital platforms for work and for communicating with their audience.

4 Results and Discussion

Matca is an independent, not-for-profit art organization in Hanoi. It was co-founded by two professional photographers. Matca started in 2016 as an online photography journal. The reason for starting online was that, as Phuong says, “starting online is without question for something lacking in Vietnam” (Interview 3) as this is “the most feasible and cost-effective option” (Interview 2). This means that their work online has always been a priority. They use their website to publish an online photography journal and they also connect to their audience through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Youtube. Facebook is their main social media platform. However, their website is their main focus. Phuong reiterates this point by saying that “everything we do is linked back to our website. Besides disseminating information about activities in the real world, our social media are used to share published articles [from their website]” (Interview 2).

As their online following grew between 2016 and 2018, they started organizing offline events in various spaces, such as coffee shops. They decided they needed a permanent physical space, which provided the impetus to open a permanent exhibition and event space. At this point, “48 Ngoc Ha came into being in 2019” (Interview 1).

They face many challenges with surviving as an art organization. This is largely because, as Phuong says, “everything we do [at Matca] is non-profit and free to access” (Interview 3). They receive funding in order to make it sustainable. “Matca does serious creative work but it doesn’t generate money” (Interview 3). They must apply for grants in order to fund projects. For instance, Matca received a grant from the Danish embassy in 2018. When talking about funding from embassies, Phuong says “they [embassies] used to invest a lot in contemporary art. As Vietnam moves forwards and there is economic growth, so most of the funding has stopped” (Interview 3). This means there are fewer funding opportunities. Due to this, they have had to find other sources of funding and collaborate internationally on projects.

They also publish books and catalogues in a physical and digital format in order to sell on their premises and online. Matca published a bilingual photography journal, written in Vietnamese and English, entitled Makét. They have also published a bilingual photobook, entitled Hà Nội, which was published in 2020. The first edition, Makét 01: A Vietnamese Photography Village, was published in 2019. It was produced by Matca in partnership
with Lao Dong Publishing House. As outlined on Matca’s website, “[t]he periodical publication Makét aims to explore and document the transforming photography scene in Vietnam” [16]. This is a physical and digital record - and an archive in itself - of how the photography scene has evolved over time. The production of this publication included scanning photographs, objects and artifacts, digitally archiving and storing materials as well as then organizing and arranging materials for the book. Alongside their photo-articles on their online journal and publicly displaying content on Facebook, these two publications provide another example of how they digitize and publicly display Vietnamese photography.

Matca publishes articles regularly for their online journal on their website. Through this work and publishing an online journal, Matca aims to nurture the local photography community, give recognition to photographers and bring contemporary Vietnamese photography to a global audience. They call their online journal an “open archive” (Interview 2 and Interview 3) - an archive of the story and record of the development of photography in Vietnam and the South East Asia region. The content is digitized and made publicly accessible, which means it is open and accessible to all. They feel it is important for the archive to be open, as many collections in Hanoi are currently hidden from the public. As Phuong says, “for a couple of years I have been receiving emails and interviews - our website is the only place to find photography in Vietnam. So we have it as open so everyone can access it” (Interview 3). With this initiative, they want to be at the forefront of the transition towards making more cultural content publicly accessible.

The mission and purpose of Matca is to raise awareness on Vietnamese photography, to develop the conversation on Vietnamese photography as well as to give photographers a digital and physical space to show their artwork publicly. They do this with physical events but, more often, through digitization and public display of artists’ work on their website. This content is then re-posted and shared on their social media accounts. Through this work, Phuong and Duc wish to show that “[t]here is more to Vietnam and Vietnamese photography than ao dai and Ha Long bay. We don’t have any specific agenda other than to showcase the diversity [in Vietnamese photography] that has always existed” (Interview 2). The commercial and easily-sharable images of traditional clothes and tourist destinations are commonly promoted in relation to Vietnamese photography internationally. Digitization can enable Vietnamese cultural professionals, like Phuong and Duc, to recreate and control the narrative on Vietnamese photography, as it involves their own choice of artworks and their own curation of digital platforms with which to disseminate to a global audience.

A key part of their mission is to redress the imbalance of representation on photography globally. “A lot of information online regarding photography is Western-centric, while local insights are often shared in casual conversations over coffee. It’s hard for an emerging photographer to break into that clique and learn from those around them. There’s also a certain division among people who pursue different genres of photography, say social documentary versus fashion. Professional opportunities remain rather limited. You’re either a photojournalist or a commercial photographer” [16]. Matca chooses to represent those artists who are not represented due to an imbalance of representation on Vietnamese photography globally. Matca wants to change this through their work and they are trying to redefine the narrative from their own perspective. “At Matca we
acknowledge and feature local photographers as well as visual artists out there whose compelling works are often overlooked in today’s context.” [16].

The reason for establishing Matca was to provide a digital platform and a physical space for independent artists in order to show professional Vietnamese photographers’ work publicly. This type of ‘outlet’ is lacking in Vietnam: “in the local context where resources for independent artists remain scarce, Matca reflects our vision to offer emerging photographers the opportunity to showcase their works as well as broaden public understanding of this visual art form” [23].

They know this is required from first-hand experience as photographers themselves: “As working Vietnamese photographers ourselves, we empathise with how hard gaining visibility and recognition can be” (Interview 1). In an interview with Vincetera in 2017, Duc said “it’s difficult to be an independent photojournalist in Vietnam today because it isn’t really a profession yet” [23]. There is a concern around photography as it is not regarded as a skilled profession, which reflects the broader issue of the nature and precarity of work in the creative industries in Vietnam. As Phuong says “they [the photographers Matca works with] are not professional photographers in the sense that they don’t earn a living from their photography practice – most have to juggle their passion project, day job, and family life. But we’re continually surprised by their level of commitment without any financial reward and feel prompted to amplify their visions” (Interview 2). This precarity in the nature of work in the creative industries is experienced globally; however, this case study has identified additional factors that add to the precarity of work in the art and cultural sector in Hanoi.

Matca wants to ensure that photography in Vietnam is seen as a profession. This means nurturing critique and discussion online as well as organizing meaningful events. They understand digital platforms (when utilized in an effective way) can be the most effective way to achieve this aim. This relates to when they state that their website is used to “build a collective platform giving recognition to a growing number of artists” [16]. This platform for photography is both digital and collective, allowing people to contribute and participate through comment, critique and dialogue. The website is created and used in a way that gives recognition to these artists, in order to ensure photography is perceived as a profession and that it is presented in a professional manner online.

Their Facebook page actively encourages comment, dialogue and critique. They say they curate their Facebook page in order to create a conducive space for this kind of dialogue on photography (Interview 1). They can control the narrative in their way on Vietnamese photography but, also, they can create an environment for intellectual discussion on photography in order to obtain its professional status.

Furthermore, there was a change in layout and style of posts on Matca’s Facebook page during lockdown. Overall, the Facebook page turned into a virtual exhibition space. This helped to diversify the function of their Facebook page, as it became a resource for art content and work opportunities for artists as well as becoming a community centre for information about the COVID-19 virus. During this time, Matca was able to develop a communication strategy in order to maintain connection with their audience and allowed them time to develop the digital curation of images, text and videos on Facebook.

Their use of digital platforms means that they can raise awareness of Vietnamese photography globally. “Over the years, we have established a strong online presence with
over 18,000 organic followers on Facebook and Instagram. Even though statistics are not everything, by utilizing the readily available digital tools, we can see the emergence of a very niche audience with a sustained interest in photography” (Interview 2). During lockdown, Matca’s Facebook page included posts about international events, jobs and resources; the posts and work became more transnational during the lockdown, showing how Matca was trying to invite Vietnamese artists to participate in international events and collaborative projects but also how Matca wanted to show their audience of professional photographers in Hanoi and Vietnam about exhibitions and events happening internationally.

With their work online, they want to attract and connect both a local and an international audience. Overall, the local audience (of professional photographers, curators, journalists and critics) is their priority but they also want to attract and connect with an international audience. “Digital platforms are used to engage with existing audiences and attract new audiences, through the use of hashtags, search engine optimization, interactions such as likes, comments and shares, and so forth. Based on the statistics, most are aged 18–34 from Vietnam with a minority from Southeast Asian countries and English speaking countries such as the US, the UK, and Australia” (Interview 2).

The time during the pandemic has had an impact on their work with digitization, as this time shifted their focus more to online and helped them to accelerate the digitization of their collections. In relation to the lockdown in Hanoi during March and April 2020, Phuong says “the lockdown happened when we were rebuilding the website. Having to stop most other activities including the physical space and our own work, we were able to finalize and launch the new site in early April. Like most other creative spaces during this time, we shifted our focus to the online sphere, in particular producing content on the website and social media (Interview 2).

The time during the pandemic has led to an increase in digital work. As a result, more aspects of their work and events now happen online. They have adapted their practice and have responded to the situation with, for example, allowing a way for photographers in Hanoi to still work. “We reached out to photographers to interview how they are utilizing their time at home” (Interview 2). During lockdown, they began to digitize more aspects of their work, such as uploading photographs of working from home, uploading images of events across the world, documenting (visually through photographs) the installation and de-installation of exhibitions. They provided their audience with a journey through their everyday work practices. This contrasts to beforehand, whereby their Facebook page was used solely as a communication tool to share updates on events.

However, there are challenges in digitization and using digital platforms, which Phuong raises when discussing the obstacles they faced during lockdown (during March and April 2020). “As content creators, we feel that both photographers and us should not feel pressured to immediately react to the current situation, given that we essentially only have two people on the team, and there is already a lot to be done” (Interview 2). Even though they did a lot of work during lockdown in terms of digitization, there is still more they would like to develop. However, they mention the lack of staff and resources. Phuong says they “haven’t had resources to find someone with the skills” and “we don’t know how to use algorithms and make use of these tools. This is something we will look into. There are just two people here. So we haven’t had time to look into it”
As mentioned earlier, the main challenges are in association with funding and resources – there are challenges around both a lack of technical resources and human resources. Moreover, Phuong says that it is “not as simple as – put this online and it’s fine” (Interview 3). This shows that digital and social media strategy requires skills, expertise and time. Even the new generation of cultural professionals are struggling to utilize digital platforms due to challenges of lack of human resources, technical resources and funding. This will hamper developments in digitization, digital display and, hence, regaining control in representation of the narrative on Vietnamese art and culture.

5 Conclusion

The findings from the case study show that Matca has used digital platforms in order to establish and maintain a professional community around photography. Digitization provides a sustainable solution for them in order to do this, due to a lack of funding and resources. Digital platforms allow Vietnamese photography to reach international audiences and provide a way for Vietnamese cultural professionals to define the narrative on Vietnamese photography.

The time during the pandemic has given Matca the chance to digitize more of their collections, to draw closer relationships with their audience (due to the increased posts and an increased amount of digitized collections during lockdown) and to widen their scope of activities to include international events and connections. Together, this has resulted in the professionalization of these digital platforms for work. These developments in digital work can be taken forward into work practices in the future; this moment has created more efficient and meaningful development of these technologies in the art and culture sector in Hanoi. Furthermore, these digital spaces are no longer just an add-on to the physical space. As a result of these changes, there is now more synergy between the physical and digital space. These developments have also provided a more widespread acceptance and validation of Facebook as a legitimate tool for work.

This increased digitization makes these online spaces feel more like ‘real’ spaces. For instance, Matca posted photographs of whole-room exhibition views during the lockdown so the audience could see all the artworks in one room. This made the audience feel as though they were going around the exhibition and made the audience feel as though they were there in person. They also digitized other content as well as their art collections, in order to provide a narrative to their communication. The time during lockdown made them think, work and operate at a more international level. Posts about international workshops and online events were in abundance at this time of lockdown. This responds to a broader development in art organizations across Hanoi, which have been trying to become more internationally focused rather than only focusing on an audience in Vietnam.

It is important to discuss the challenges that cultural professionals in Hanoi are facing in the digitization process, as this is distinct from other Asian countries as well as from Western countries. These challenges include the lack of human resources in terms of skilled personnel, lack of funding, and lack of technical resources such as 3D scanners in order to properly digitize cultural objects. There is a need for more advanced digitization technologies, such as 3D scanners and 3D cameras. Broadly speaking, this
is required in order to avoid the most powerful museums becoming even more influential globally whilst leaving behind those that cannot afford to make their collections publicly accessible online. The digitization divide will increase if sustainable solutions are not found.

However, the opportunities of digitizing art and cultural collections for Hanoi, and Vietnam more broadly, are twofold. Firstly, digitization of content means that more people can access and view art and cultural collections, both relating to traditional culture and contemporary culture, at the local and international level. Secondly, Vietnamese cultural professionals can shape their own narrative on what is contemporary or traditional Vietnamese culture. This connects with the broader shift in Vietnam – moving away from the narrative and image associated with the phrase ‘made in Vietnam’ to a new narrative and image associated with the phrase ‘designed, innovated and created in Vietnam’. This shift is important for the preservation and representation of Vietnamese cultural heritage and contemporary culture.

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