

# How Non-profit Art Spaces in Hanoi, Vietnam, used Facebook to Communicate, Exhibit and Promote Art and Culture During the Closure of Physical Spaces

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**Abstract:** The Covid-19 Pandemic has changed the nature and importance of arts communication, exhibition and promotion via social media. However, moving fully online has highlighted global inequalities in digital inclusion and access, with inherent biases towards content from the West and larger cultural institutions with sufficient technical, human and financial resources in order to survive through the Covid-19 Pandemic. This paper investigates how non-profit art spaces in Hanoi, Vietnam, developed their use of Facebook for effective communication, exhibition and promotion of Vietnamese art and culture during the first closure of physical premises. With the shift of all work online due to Covid-19 Pandemic social distancing measures, Facebook provided non-profit art spaces with a viable digital solution at a time of increased pressure to connect with the audience. Facebook provided a way to overcome challenges faced by non-profit art spaces with lack of financial, human and technical resources, by providing a free and widely accessible social media platform. The current study draws upon a digital ethnography of Facebook posts over 2 months and 50 semi-structured interviews with cultural professionals in Hanoi. The findings highlight changes in the use of Facebook, the digital strategies that were created for working fully online, and how art spaces maintained connection with the audience during the closure of physical premises between March and April 2020. This study identifies changes in social media usage patterns in three main ways: 1) the introduction of using Facebook for digital exhibition and holding live events, 2) changes in type of promotional content, and 3) changes in communication style with the introduction of an effective rhetoric of care. Together, the findings highlight changes in the nature and importance of arts communication, exhibition and promotion via social media in the cultural sector due the Covid-19 Pandemic. Developments over this time could help provide a sustainable solution to overcome challenges faced in the cultural sector in Vietnam and overcome global inequalities in access and inclusion online.

**Keywords:** cultural sector, Facebook, social media, Covid-19 Pandemic, non-profit art spaces

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## 1. Introduction

Globally, the nature and importance of arts communication, exhibition and promotion via social media in the cultural sector has changed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Digital technologies have been utilized in order to create virtual exhibitions and online tours alongside high-quality digitization of art collections. However, the route to digital transition is not the same in a developing country like Vietnam. This shows a need to understand what is happening in Vietnam, a country that faces challenges in digital transition and digital inequalities in access and inclusion. The issue here has to do with power over access and representation on art and culture on a global scale. For instance, institutions such as the Louvre Museum or the Victoria & Albert Museum can digitally display and make their collections accessible using the latest digital technologies and employ skilled staff dedicated to this role, due to the availability of technical resources, human resources and funding. This is in contrast to the issues with financial, technical and human resources experienced in Vietnam. This can impede or slow down the digitization process and, hence, further increase the digitization divide. As Chaumont (2020) argues, “preserving becomes the privilege of the hegemony; where more technological-advanced countries get to define, choose and provide cultural material for the rest of the world.”

This paper investigates how non-profit art spaces in Hanoi, Vietnam, used Facebook to communicate, exhibit and promote art and culture during the first full closure of physical art spaces due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. With the shift of all work, events, and audiences online, Facebook provided these non-profit art spaces with a viable digital solution at a time of increased pressure to connect with audiences, by providing a free and widely accessible social media platform. The use of social media has become a popular choice amongst non-profit art spaces as the main digital platform for work, as it can help overcome challenges they face with lack of financial, human and technical resources. These challenges are most acutely faced by non-profits in Hanoi (in comparison to the commercial galleries or state museums) and, moreover, this has become more acute during the Covid-19 Pandemic with increased pressure to find sources of funding and ways to maintain connection with the audience. Hence, this was a time when non-profits were forced to become more innovative and strategic in their use of social media to connect with the audience and promote themselves in order to survive.

These art spaces' Facebook posts were couched in an altruistic, therapeutic rhetoric of care, in order to foster trust and maintain engagement with audiences. The messages included emotive appeals to 'stay safe' and 'stay together as a community' as well as encouraging the audience to use artwork as a tool 'to console' and 'for the health of the community'. The language used related to 'pandemic rhetoric' used by governments and healthcare sector (Offerdal et al. 2021; Mangiò et al. 2021; Ivic 2020). This relates to the affordances of social media for the recontextualization of content (Wodak and Reisigl 2009; Muwafaq, Sumarlam and Kristina 2018), particularly in relation to the Covid-19 Pandemic. Broadly speaking, the use of social media in the arts has increased over the past decade (Janner et al. 2012; Turrini et al. 2011; Magdalena and Sundjaja 2019), with platforms taking on a participatory nature and allowing for co-creation. While a lot of research looks at this from the visitor perspective (Magdalena and Sundjaja 2019; Janner et al. 2012; Turrini et al. 2011; Magdalena and Sundjaja 2019), there is less from the perspective of the art spaces. Yet, this perspective is especially important at a time when art spaces are being forced to adapt to new regulations and ways of working and, subsequently, must find effective ways of communicating with the audience and creating experiences digitally.

The current study draws upon a digital ethnography of Facebook posts conducted over 2 months between March and April 2020 and 50 semi-structured interviews carried out with cultural professionals in Hanoi between May 2020 and May 2021. This methodology was used to address the question: How did non-profit art spaces maintain connection with their audiences during the first full closure and first full transition to online work? This paper identifies 3 main changes in social media usage patterns: 1) the introduction of using Facebook for digital exhibition and holding live events, which has transformed their Facebook pages into a community center and experiential 'living' space; 2) changes in type of promotional content, including promotion using artwork, promotion of the art space using self-taken diary-like photographs, and community promotion in order to showcase the work of artists and other art spaces in the art community across Hanoi as well as more promotion of international events and work opportunities; 3) changes in communication style, which became more intimate and caring, with the introduction of an effective rhetoric of care to gain trust and maintain connection with the audience through the closure. These developments in the use of Facebook, which came about at the start of the closure of physical spaces in Hanoi, have led to new parameters of trust, care and levels of intimacy, emotion, and disclosure with the audience. It has also changed the way art is published, displayed and exhibited to audiences as well as changing the nature of promotion. As a result, Facebook has also acquired new functions, becoming a community center and a provider of cultural experiences.

## **2. Challenges for Non-Profits in the Cultural Sector in Vietnam**

Non-profit art spaces in Hanoi face challenges in their work with lack of human, technical and financial resources, which hinder the pace and quality of digital transition. These challenges prevent them from being able to fully harness the opportunities of the latest digital technologies, apps and software for the exhibition and dissemination of art. Furthermore, non-profits do not receive state funding for digitization projects, for the development of digital platforms, for training, or for employment of specialist digital staff. As Participant 16 from Gianh says, 'there are only two of us here so things cannot be done as quickly as we'd like.' Instead, they must rely on securing funding for each project through international councils in Vietnam, such as Goethe Institute or British Council. However, as Participant 18 from Cá says, 'the amount of funding from international councils has been reducing as Vietnam develops.' As Participant 2 from Phò Dày says, 'challenges include the need for infrastructure for digitization. It's a high tech field that needs skill and budget.' Participant 11 from Thai Binh says 'the challenge is with human resources'. Due to this, they rely more on social media as it is free and they choose Facebook because it is the most popular platform in Vietnam among the general public.

It is also important to examine the work of non-profit art spaces as they operate with strong arts-centred beliefs and their work is about providing social good, educating the public, and providing recognition of and raising the value of the art community. However, there are external pressures with sourcing funding and sponsors. This means some non-profits have to act more like a business on social media and it is under this work environment that they convey their messages to their audiences online (Lee 2005; Yue 2021).

These challenges have become more acute during the Covid-19 Pandemic, as non-profit art spaces fall outside of government relief funds. Government staff and state institutions in the cultural sector in Hanoi have been supported financially and kept in a job throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic. Conversely, independent organizations have not had such support, as they fall outside of the remit for help by being non-profit organizations. As Minh (2020) reports, 'the government has passed a VND62 trillion (\$2.6 billion) financial

support package for poor people and businesses affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The package, approved by Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, targets six categories of individuals and businesses.’ However, non-profit art spaces do not fall within any of the six categories. As Yue (2021) argues, ‘amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, nonprofits’ available resources and budgets are stretched even thinner[...]and it becomes crucial for nonprofits to create virtual communication that is engaging and effective.’ Hence, non-profits have been leading in the creation of engaging and effective content online. Furthermore, they have made developments and transitions themselves, independent of government support, as grassroots projects or as individual projects with funding from international councils.

### **3. The Affordances of Social Media Platforms for Arts Communication, Exhibition and Promotion during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

Globally, the use and importance of social media platforms has changed with work in the cultural sector due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. The affordances of social media for arts communication, exhibition, and promotion, which has been felt particularly during the Covid-19 Pandemic, is fourfold:

Firstly, the affordance of social media for providing a sense of community (Gere 2012; Sadiku et al. 2017) is relevant for the time during the Covid-19 Pandemic, as audiences have required the feeling of community and togetherness. This links to Gere (2012) who discusses how digitality has replaced the sense of community that has been lost in society. Gere (2012: 2) discusses how the digital provides a pseudo-sense of touch, arguing that new technologies ‘invoke tropes of touch’. This has been especially important during the Covid-19 Pandemic, as social media platforms have become spaces for immersive experiences that have been helpful in order to overcome the lack of ‘touch’ and in-person community events at this time.

Secondly, art spaces now use social media platforms to provide content and experiences in order to facilitate community connectivity and participation. As Gere (2012: 1) argues, social media platforms allow ‘connectivity, collaboration, communication, community and participation’ (Gere 2012: 1). Consequently, social media platforms are now dynamic and experiential ‘living’ spaces, used for the display of art collections and holding events. This is what Miles (2018) terms ‘digital staging’, whereby a mixture of text, image, promotion and events actually enhances art content, by providing an interactive, active experience for the audience. Miles (2018) argues this ‘brings the audience closer to the process and intensifies their experience of it.’

Thirdly, social media platforms allow for the combination of different mediums and types of content, which means content can assume new meaning or can be applied to new contexts. This also relates to the use of rhetoric in communication on social media (Nortio, Niska and Renvik 2021; Sparby 2017; Wahlstrom and Tornberg 2020), whereby certain messages and language were applied purposefully for a certain reason, for a certain affect, or to align with a particular context. This can be seen in the ways that non-profit art spaces in Hanoi displayed art collections, shared episodic narratives of their daily lives through photographs, and recontextualized artworks and event announcements in relation to Covid-19 Pandemic updates. As Wodak and Reisigl (2009) argue, content can be recontextualized away from its prior context on social media and, as Muwafiq, Sumarlam and Kristina (2018) argue, this recontextualization can result in content acquiring new meaning.

Fourthly, social media platforms provide a conducive space for promotional communication. As Hausmann and Poellmann (2013) argue, social media platforms can spread information and broadcast messages effectively and efficiently and, in particular, Facebook ‘allows for fast reactions, exchange of short messages and dialogue with target groups can happen quickly and easily.’ Arts marketing on social media is also becoming increasingly popular amongst cultural institutions as a way to engage audiences (Wiid and Mora-Avila 2017). In addition, Stanoeva (2019: 1) argues ‘social media is a very good way to engage and inform audiences in their activities and events via advertising, PR and promotions.’

## **4. Method**

### **4.1 Methodology**

A digital ethnography was conducted on 7 non-profit art spaces’ Facebook pages prior to and during the first closure of physical art spaces in Hanoi. This was conducted over 2 months between 27 February and 27 April 2020. This time period was chosen purposefully to include the period just before and during the closure in Hanoi. This allowed an observation of the changes in communication, types of content, and use of Facebook.

The methodology also included 50 semi-structured interviews with cultural professionals working in Hanoi. Interview participants were initially recruited based on the researcher's links with industry partners in the cultural sector. Snowball sampling was used in order to recruit further interview participants. The interviews were carried out between May 2020 and May 2021. 7 of the interviewees were the co-founders or curators working at the non-profit art spaces included in the digital ethnography sample. The other 43 interviewees included curators, museum directors, museum communications directors, university and art school directors, auction house directors, visual artists and commercial gallery directors. Respondents were asked about how they changed their way of working after closure, their new digital work practices, event organization online, and changes in their way of using Facebook. It was important to include a wider range of sectors in interviews in order to understand the developments in digitization and work practices online across the cultural sector in Hanoi, inclusive of different sub-sectors, including commercial galleries, art auction houses, state museums, as this allowed an understanding of the differences in work practices online, state funding and its impact on use of digital platforms. Informed consent was gained prior to interviews and ethical approval was granted for the research project. Each participant's institution and name has been de-identified to reduce any employer/employee risk. They have been given a participant number and the institution has been given a pseudonym in the Results Section.

#### **4.2 Sample Population and Digital Platform**

7 independent, non-profit art spaces were selected as the sample for the digital ethnography. All 7 operated out of physical premises in Hanoi prior to the lockdown. This was an important criterion as it meant that all work practices moved online. These art spaces were chosen using purposive sampling, providing a particular segment of the cultural sector in Hanoi.

Facebook was chosen as the social media platform for analysis because it is the most commonly used social media platform for work in the cultural sector in Hanoi and is the most commonly used social media platform amongst the general public in Vietnam. Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Vietnam for the general public and work in the cultural sector. While this means there is a large potential audience, especially the young Vietnamese audience, many interviewees say it is not professional enough. The tension is they feel they have to be on Facebook and feel they have to share everything. As of January 2021, there are 68.72 million internet users in Vietnam. Internet penetration is 70.3%. 91.7% of internet users in Vietnam use Facebook. 98.8% access Facebook via smartphones (Datareportal 2021). The selection sample of Facebook posts represents only a portion of all the posts during this time period. As Banaji and Buckingham (2013: 15) argue, 'the Internet is a decentralized medium, and it is impossible to gain a comprehensive picture of everything that is available online, much less construct a representative sample of it'. Hogan (2018) argues that it is not possible to see everything that is posted on Facebook, which provides limitations for researchers and research carried out on Facebook. Furthermore, 'social media sites use friendship connections to power key functionality for users, such as the organization of a newsfeed', meaning that users never see everything. As Hogan (2018) argues, APIs close off access to certain data and 'work as technological gatekeepers' to data, posts, and info, as Facebook 'sorts and filters these posts'.

#### **4.3 Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection of Facebook posts was collected once each week and data analysis was conducted in May 2020. The study collected each individual post on the 7 art spaces' Facebook walls (n=117) just prior to and during the first closure in Hanoi, from 27 February to 27 April 2020. Each Facebook post acted as one unit of analysis. All posts from this period, which were visible at the time of access for the researcher, were analysed. The study also included each individual post from the 7 art spaces between 27 February and 10 March (n=32) just prior to closure and between 11 March and 27 April (n=85) during the closure of physical spaces. The posts were coded manually due to the relatively small sample size.

### **5. Results**

The respondents said that the closure of their physical premises and full transition online had an impact on the following 5 aspects in relation to their use of and perceived function of Facebook for work:

(1) Respondents said there were advancements in their skills and understanding on how to use Facebook for communicating with their audiences, for sharing artworks and art collections, and for holding events.

*'we used the closure to exploit the advantage of online media platforms like Facebook.'* (Participant 5 from Ba Thin).

*'we used Facebook during closure to develop and expand an information system, image and online exhibition project on Facebook.'* (Participant 7 from Bac Giang).

*'previously, Nho Que carried out several similar activities, but they had not reached the thorough and synchronized stage.'* (Participant 3 from Nho Que).

(2) Respondents said they had time to trial new types of content on Facebook, with the introduction of art projects designed specifically-for-Facebook and existing artworks or art collections published directly to and then exhibited on Facebook.

*'we trialed online workshops.'* (Participant 11 from Thai Binh).

*'we trialed artist videos, where we asked artists to video themselves in their studio or at home with their artwork.'* (Participant 6 from Luc Nam).

*'we took Covid-19 lockdown as an opportunity to promote more digital content, like selling e-books instead of traditional books, livestreaming events, and art talks via Facebook.'* (Participant 46 from Thu Kay).

(3) Respondents said that learnt how to promote artwork, events and their art space. They also said they learnt how to tailor content to the art community and general public as well as to include promotion of themselves, other art spaces across Hanoi, and about international events. During closure, they had time to consider more about their external image and how they should promote themselves in order to best engage the audience.

*'Before we are indifferent, we do not care[...]Now we have to be creative about how to survive better. So, we are forced to upload more stuff[...]We are no longer indifferent[...]Suddenly now we believe that this is needed so that people know more about us.'* (Participant 21 from Hai Dung).

(4) Respondents mentioned the new purpose and importance of Facebook for maintaining connection by sharing messages of hope.

*'we continued to maintain connection with the audience by promoting a dynamic and creative spirit throughout organizing art events, like workshops and talks in the form of online, to help spread positive energy in the time of instability.'* (Participant 12 from Thao).

(5) Respondents said this time has allowed them to diversify the function of Facebook. Prior to closure, respondents say it was used for news and announcements. Conversely, respondents said they are now using Facebook as an experiential space for the exhibition of art collections and cultural experiences.

*'we try to make the digital space a real experiential space, with uploading more art and doing virtual exhibitions, tours, with the same feeling as with the event in person, take part and ask questions.'* (Participant 20 from Ben Hai).

*'our digital platforms have developed and now can become exhibition spaces.'* (Participant 7 from Bac Giang).

The findings from the digital ethnography also demonstrate changes in communication, exhibition, and promotion of art and culture on FB during the closure in comparison to prior to the closure. This is visible when comparing the types of posts prior to and during the closure. Prior to the closure, there were 4 main types of posts (with associated content) on Facebook across the 7 art spaces:

1. Visual: photographs or videos of exhibitions and events that took place in the physical art spaces, accompanied by a short text.
2. News: sharing links to news and media articles about the art space's activities.

3. User-generated content: quotations from the audience about the art space's events.
4. Announcements: announcements of event openings.

During closure, there were 4 types of posts (with associated content):

1. Emotional and Inspirational: artworks alongside text that conveyed messages of hope, togetherness and connection.
2. Informative: artworks alongside messages about Covid-19 Pandemic updates or social distancing measures and announcements their closure.
3. Experience: exhibition of artworks and holding events like livestreaming workshops or artist videos.
4. Self-promotion: photographs of the art space alongside messages to share messages of hope and togetherness. Also, this included photographs to 'throwbacks' of past events, which were re-posted in order to share messages of hope that such group events will happen again.
5. External event promotion: information about international virtual events for the general public and work opportunities for the professional art community.

## **6. Conclusion**

The findings show there have been changes in the use and importance of Facebook for arts communication, exhibition and promotion during the closure. This paper has identified 3 main changes in social media usage patterns: 1) the introduction of using Facebook for digital exhibition and holding live events, which has transformed their Facebook pages into a community center and experiential 'living' space; 2) changes in type of promotional content, including promotion using artwork, promotion of the art space using self-taken diary-like photographs, and community promotion in order to showcase the work of artists and other art spaces in the art community across Hanoi as well as more promotion of international events and work opportunities; 3) changes in communication style, which became more intimate and caring, with the introduction of an effective rhetoric of care to gain trust and maintain connection with the audience through the closure, which was visible in the messages alongside artworks, photographs of the art space, promotion or links to their own and external events.

The Facebook posts across all 7 art spaces shared some key stylistic features during closure. This can be seen with artworks positioned alongside information updates regarding the Covid-19 pandemic and closures of the art spaces, artworks with messages in line with community values to 'stay together' or 'get through this together', and artworks positioned alongside accompanying text to console and inspire the audience. There was also a sense of care for the professional art community and general public through their promotion, with announcing events or calls for work abroad for professional artists, promoting previous events to create emotion and feeling of togetherness, and providing audiences with links to international resources for virtual museum tours or film archives. This shows there have been changes across the sector and a marked change due to the full transition online. There were posts directed to the general audience and professional art community as well as more links to international events or links to work opportunities for artists. There was an increase in the amount of art content and art projects made specifically for and published directly on Facebook, responding to artists' needs for work as well as the general audiences' needs for experiences and events.

There was an introduction of more types of promotional content and a closer synergy between art and promotional content, reinforced by the way all posts applied a rhetoric of care. This time allowed cultural professionals to know how to promote their events, how to promote artwork, and how to promote their art space in a 'caring' way. There was also an increased amount of international event promotion, with Facebook pages becoming community centers for further information, work opportunities or events across Hanoi and internationally.

The function of Facebook changed for the art spaces, art community and audience at this time. For the art spaces, it has changed in terms of what kind of and how content was disseminated. Facebook transitioned from solely a place used for sharing news, announcements, and promotion to a space for providing experiences and information on Covid-19 updates or work opportunities. This has transformed these Facebook pages into hybrid spaces, with the inclusion of different types of content, and an active space for experiencing content, events and exhibitions as well as providing active dialogue and exchange between the art space, the professional art community, and the audience. This provides new ways of presenting and displaying and experiencing art. Furthermore, the work that has been done during closure has diversified the function of Facebook into a more

professional platform and a viable option for digital experience and communication in the future within the cultural sector.

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