# Trust in Strangers:
## "Online Food Vendors" in Urban Vietnam

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## Introduction

For a society that went through a 30-year war of independence and unification, trust in one another, or anyone for that matter, carries an unmeasurable value. The war pitted Vietnamese of different social origins, regional origins, and political colors against each other in the firefights raging in their backyards. Internal migration, often prompted by political expediencies, from the north to the south, and the other way, turned Vietnamese strangers to each other. The end of the war did not slow down the Vietnamese internal migration. The decades following the Doi Moi reforms of 1986 added an even more push to the migration. Recent findings show that for the period 2004-9, close to seven million (of the country with a total population of 80 million, 2016) migrated within Vietnam[2]. Over half of these migrating Vietnamese headed for the three metropolises of Ho Chi Minh, Hanoi, and Da Nang.[3]

In this unusually homogeneous Asian society, with one ethnic group -- the Kinhs -- accounting for close to 90% of its total population, it is the high mobility among the population that turns the otherwise familiar neighbors to the unusual strangers to each other. Distrust and not trust can easily interfere with their human relationships.

The magnitude of demographic changes, which Vietnam is going through, usually took over more than a century in the developed societies. Regardless, the impact on people may be the same as Anthony Giddens may put it, people "come[s] from outside and ... [are] potentially suspect"[4] to one another. In such a highly mobile society, the primary function of communication would have to be the reduction of the margin of liberal – i.e., unpredictable – interpretations of what is being communicated. From a different perspective, that reduction is the necessity for stabilizing one's "expectations"[5] of others, lest one should invest time and

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[2] See Narciso 2017.

[3] Ibid., 143.

[4] Giddens 1990, 80.

[5] Luhmann 2017, 87.

opportunities to vet everyone who comes into one's life. How, then, do the urban Vietnamese in a highly fluid social relationship – with uncertain neighbors -- sustain everyday life?

Of particularly indicative of the puzzling role of "trust" among the Vietnamese is the recent rise of the "online food vendors". The surge is particularly striking since the "vendors" are often the residents of the living complex where the clients reside, usually with no apparent official permits for the business, *and* the "strangers" sharing only the same roof with their clients. Despite these oddities, these online vendors are changing one behavior of urban Vietnamese essential to their everyday life – procurement and consumption of food.

These vendors operate on an individual basis, and they are neither members of a guild, union, or association. They use popular social networks such as Facebook, or Zalo, to reach their customers. They do not own a platform of transactions such as a make-shift space on the street with tables and chairs. They deliver the merchandizes on their own. The customers, in turn, rely on "virtual" – online -- presentations (photos and sales pitch) of the goods (food), and the online transactions with the vendors. Nagging questions emerge: how the customers assure themselves that their procured goods are safe, and where and how "trust" operates in the minds of urban Vietnamese.

This paper is an interim report, and attempts to shed light on one of the intriguing issues of a transitional society, the communication among a mobile population and how it generates "trust" in others and themselves in Vietnam.[6]

## Background

Economic and political reforms in the 1980s and the ensuing decades greatly altered the living environment in Vietnam. Urbanization stands out among the changes especially relevant to the present inquiry.

The urban population stood at 28.5% of the total population as of 2007[7] and gave way to 40% 12 years later.[8] While still 60% of the population live in rural areas in 2019 (63 million)[9]. One of its immediate consequences is a massive demand for housing in big cities, which led to the mushrooming of high-rise apartment complexes in them. In 2018, there are approximately 3,000 apartment complexes,

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[6] I have examined the issue of trust, the behavioral basis, in another context where ordinary people face the opportunities for decision making while the distance between them and those experts who are in the position of providing advice and instructions turns all concerned parties strangers to one another. See Vu, Le Thao Chi 2020 (forthcoming).

[7] Statista 2019.

[8] KTDT 2019.

[9] Vietnam Population Census 2019.

mostly in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh. In these two cities, apartment units account for 87.3% (40,000 units) of the total housing supply in Hanoi, and 90% (45,000 units) in Ho Chi Minh.[10]

Another change accompanying urbanization is the increase in the number of supermarkets. While there were only 385 supermarkets in 2005, mainly concentrated in the two urban hubs of Vietnam (59 in Hanoi and 82 in Ho Chi Minh), this number more than doubled in 2018 with 1009 supermarkets (134 in Hanoi and 204 in Ho Chi Minh)[11]. These supermarkets are not to replace existing traditional (outdoor) markets. They are necessary additions in response to the diverse and increasing demands of the urban Vietnamese.

The rapid spread of the Internet in Vietnam is another change, giving the urban Vietnamese a new handle on their everyday life: online shopping. A Report, “Vietnam Consumer Trend 2019)” by Q & Me Online Market Research (by Asia Plus Inc.), gives a sense of what is coming: online retailing revenue, though still small in the total retail sales, has increased steadily, from 2.1% (2014) to 3.5% (2017) and is expected to reach 5% in 2020. The extensive Internet users (82 million, an equivalent of 83% of the total population in 2019) hints at an imminent surge in online business.

Of the total mobile users, up to 67% own smartphones. More people have access to the Internet and spend more time on Internet, especially through mobile phones (103 minutes/day in 2016 to 166 minutes/day in 2019). The most frequently-used social networks include Facebook (and its Messenger) and Zalo. A net result: Vietnamese are spending more money on online shopping. In 2014, one Vietnamese shopper spent $160/ year, and the figure more than doubled in 2018, reaching $350/ year, for a country whose GNP in the same year was $1900. Popular products for online shopping include fashion (78%), IT-related devices (50%), and cosmetics (44%). Popular online shopping windows include Shopee (75%), Lazada (70%), Tiki (58%). An interesting point to note: 80% of online shoppers still opt to rely on cash payments (upon delivery) for their transactions.

It is against this backdrop of urban life, as outlined above, that the “online vendors” gain tractions on the urban Vietnamese daily life.

## From Street food vendors to “Online food vendors”

Vietnam and many other developing countries are well-known for the ubiquity of food vendors and hawkers pushing their food carts through busy streets in cities. As part of protecting the street vendor’s rights, India developed a national policy on street vendors in 2004. It defined the street vendors as those “who offer[s] goods or

[10] TBCK 2019.

[11] GSO 2019.

services for sale to the public without having a permanently-built structure but with a temporary static structure or mobile stall (or head-load)."[12] Vietnam has its share of street vendors as defined above in just about everywhere, from a small rural town to the streets of Ho Chi Minh.

In contrast, the new breed, the "online food vendors," in Vietnam have neither a "permanently-built structure" like a restaurant or food shop nor a "temporary static structure or mobile stall." Nor are many of them "professionals" earning the livelihood from their operation. They are housewives, women on maternity leave, and those who want to do this as a side job (over the weekends). They engage in this business spontaneously, i.e., not prompted by the demands of everyday life. They sell home-made food or self-sourced food materials through social networks. The food they provide is just as various as street food vendors, including cooked food, snacks, local specialties to fresh materials like meat, seafood, vegetables.

There is no precise data available on the number of people engaged in this business, but the indications are that more and more people are turning this operation into their full-time job and the primary source of income.

A few common threads are running through both "street food vendors" and "online food vendors". Neither belongs to any guild nor have a transportation means to deliver food and services. They are spontaneous and individual-based, and their products usually do not go through official quality control standards. What makes the "online vendors" different from street vendors is that the former is not as "mobile" as the latter. "Online vendors" work at home, preparing food and selling it through social networks. Regardless, they are just as efficient with responsive interactions and quick delivery services (by making use of networks of motorcycle taxi drivers in towns).

These common threads, however, do not explain the increasing attraction of online vendors. After all, home delivery services are booming everywhere and available for any restaurants or food shops in town as well. Conventional food services make full use of online ads., too.

The secret, such as it is, for this surge of the online food vendors may be hidden in their mantras: "*I sell what I eat/use*." Advertising messages have a similar ring to them: "Today *my home* prepares this," "this is from *my hometown*," or "this is from *my yard*". The appeal of intimacy resonating in these mantras has become more potent than before now that food safety issue has been raging in Vietnam. The sense of "home" projected by the online vendors may reduce, psychologically, the distance between consumers and producers, which has widened in modern societies. Whether or not consumers can verify the message "*I sell what I eat/use*" from the vendors matters less than the fact that they can hear it directly from the sellers.

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[12] See NASVI.

## A puzzle

On the surface, nothing seems to be particularly alarming in the surge of the "online food vendors." The vendors appear to operate on their goodwill and conscience, which are reciprocated by the consumers' trust in what they procure and whom they procure them from. The surge should not be taken lightly as an isolated phenomenon since it touches upon one of the principal concerns of anyone's daily life – health.

Within the past ten years, from 2010 to 2020, the people with cancer in Vietnam has almost doubled, from estimated 126,000 in 2010 to 200,000 in 2020[13]. Of them, unhygienic food is responsible for up to 35% (smoking accounts for 30%, and only 5-10% of genetic reasons)[14]. The 2016 World Bank report on "Vietnam Food Safety Risks Management: Challenges and Opportunities"[15] cites from a USAID national survey (2016) that food safety was one of the most pressing issues for Vietnamese (higher than education, health care, and governance). People are more concerned apparently with chemicals and toxin contamination of food rather than with microbial contamination. In reality, the highest proportion of foodborne diseases is traceable to microorganisms (42%), followed by natural toxins (28%) and chemicals (4%), while 26% of the causal agent remains unknown. Bacterial contamination was also the prominent reason for all rejections of agri-food product imports from Vietnam into the European Union, the United States and Japan for the period between 2002 and 2010.[16]

While food safety problems, though pressing, have not resulted in a public health crisis, there is a communication crisis. Ordinary people usually have only a faint idea about the contours of the food safety problem: who is responsible for which part of food production, distribution and consumption. They have no means at their disposal to determine whom to trust in order to protect themselves against the harm.

Large-scale supermarkets seem to win more trust among ordinary customers. The penetration of supermarkets in Vietnam, however, still remains the lowest among the countries in the region. Vietnamese maintain their traditional shopping habit with a preference for fresh produce procured on the day of consumption from traditional, neighborhood, markets. Besides, rumors never cease to float that "dirty food" has also made its way to the shelves of the supermarket.

Against such background, the "online food vendors" have at least a vague look of an alternative. A puzzle still remains: how do urban Vietnamese trust these

[13] ATVSTP 2019.

[14] The Saigon Times 2016.

[15] World Bank 2016.

[16] Ibid.

vendors and their goods while most of these online food vendors are usually strangers to them? What are the foundations for their trust in the vendors and, more importantly, why they need to, and how they establish, trust in them?

## Trust in the Modern Period

Perhaps a few words are necessary to place "trust" in a meaningful perspective, lest we should concern ourselves with this amorphous form of consciousness in the abstract. The living environment as we live it is a product of centuries of deepening division of labor which the need for increased productivity has necessitated. A net result is the fusion of disparate individuals into social relationships where what one does counts more than what he or she is, i.e., a community of role-performers (specialists or experts). As Anthony Giddens, among others, points out, such a community is "not confined to areas of technological expertise. [It] extend[s] to the intimacies of the [individuals]".[17]

The other side of the same coin is the increased dependence of the individuals upon these specialists, impersonal role-performers. Dealing with all demands of life, that dependence is something that no one can opt out, as the alternative to it is an immense complexity that comes with incessant decisions on one's counsel alone. It is the need to reduce this complexity that allows "trust" to play an unexchangeable role.[18]

A quick scan of our everyday life uncovers the ubiquity of this "trust". Day in and day out, we are constantly in contact with *strangers* whom we have never met or known personally. A *strange* chef prepares our food; *strange* train/bus/ taxi drivers transport us; we live in a house designed by a *strange* architect, and built by a *strange* construction worker; we drive a car assembled by *strange* mechanics. How these things are produced, and who are involved in that production process are no longer in our plain view or control. We have lived or learned to live with these strangers who have penetrated deeply in our everyday life. The alternative to strangers' intrusion into our lives is the impossible task of self-management. We trust strangers, in other words, because the alternative to them is utter complexity and uncertainty, and not out of certainty *about* the strangers and things and services they bring in to our life.

How do the highly mobile urban Vietnamese, as mentioned above, see the opportunities for "trust" to intervene with their life?

[17] Giddens 1991, 18.

[18] For a further discussion of trust, see Luhmann 2017, especially pp. 5-11, 27-35, and 79-104.

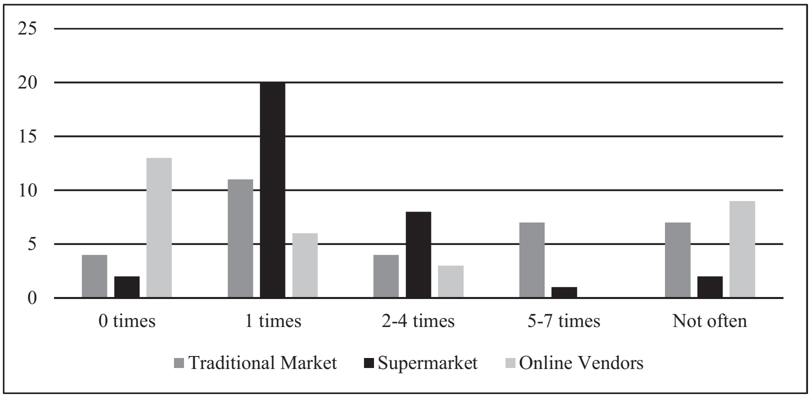
## An investigation: Food shopping behaviors in urban Vietnam

What follows is a brief sketch of urban Vietnamese food shopping behavior, based on an online survey between October 15 and October 22, 2019 and selected interview data. The number of respondents is 33 (3 males and 30 females). Age ranges from the 20s to the 40s (3 in their 20s, 19 in their 30s, and 11 in the 40s). Most of the respondents are office workers (31), and 2 are housewives. The majority of them (27) is now residing in Ho Chi Minh City, the busiest city in Vietnam.

***Food Markets: Use and Trust***

Chart 1 shows that 29 of 33 (88%) visit the supermarket at least once a week. A contrast maybe 22 (67%) who go to traditional markets[19] and 9 (29%) who shop at the online food markets. These figures are not mutually exclusive. Some of the supermarket users occasionally visit traditional and online food sellers. Nonetheless, Chart 1 suggests the predominance of the supermarket among the respondents.

Chart 1. Frequency of Market Use (per week)




*"Not often" here means 1-2 times a month.*

[19] A "traditional market" usually refer to a small-scale mom-and-pop shop to a cluster of such small-scale shops where they offer all sorts of goods, from food (vegetables and meat) to inexpensive cosmetics, from cigarettes to bottled water.

Chart 2. Trust - Parameter

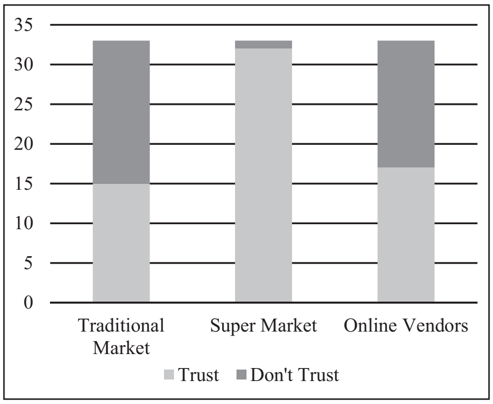
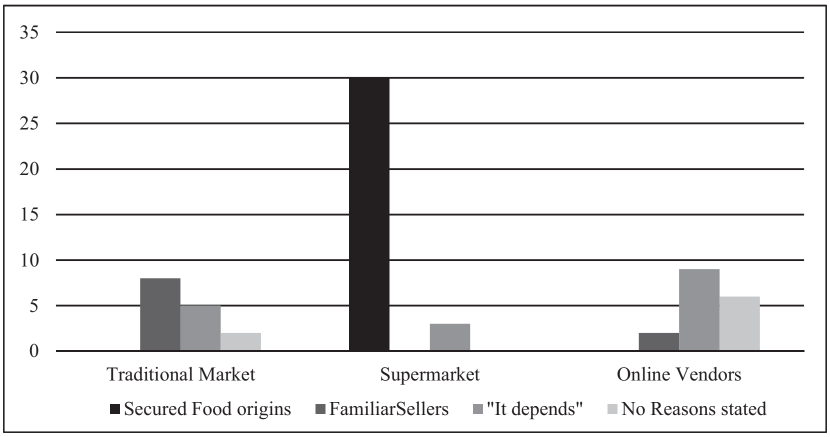



Chart 2 and Chart 3 indicate that the frequent use of the supermarkets is sustained by the respondents' "trust" in them, as 32 (96%) so expressed. The reasons for the supermarkets' high mark on the trust include the secured origins (safety). They also added fixed prices, which I interpret suggests the predictability, i.e., there is very little uncertainty involved in shopping at the markets. The number of people who "trust" traditional markets and online vendors is much smaller, 15/33 (45%) and 17/33 (51%), respectively.

Chart 3 presents, on the other hand, somewhat intriguing pictures of the clients' decisions. Eight of 15 (53%) use the traditional markets for the familiarity of the sellers, an irrelevant factor for the supermarket users. Yet, the same factor also plays a very limited role (2/17= 11%) for online shoppers. Then there is a somewhat

Chart 3. Trust - Reasons

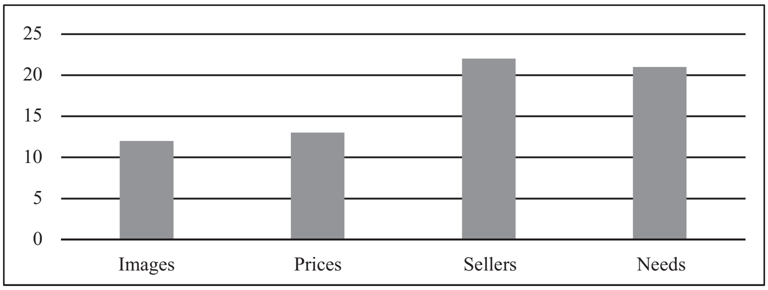


ambiguous response, "It Depends." More than half, 9, of the 17 respondents who cite this factor, make use of online vendors. "It – shopping -- Depends" on various reasons such as the personality of the sellers as the clients come to contact with them, and/or the reputations of the sellers the clients hear, and/or the introduction of the sellers on the homepage which the *client's* friends introduced.

***An Experience with "Online Food Vendors"***

The two factors that influence the consumers' decisions at the time of online shopping are their needs (21/33=64%) and the sellers (22/33=67%), as shown in Chart 4. Here the "sellers" indicate their "presence" through the clients' intimate contact at the time of transactions such as how they promote their products and how they interact with the clients.

Chart 4. Factors influence their decision to purchase




These consumers usually test the quality of the product by giving it a try (11/33=33%), checking online reviews (7/33=21%), relying on their instinct (5/33=15%), and relying on what the sellers tell them (3/33=9%), as shown in Chart 5. Yet, 23/33 (69%) of the respondents have had disappointing experiences with online food vendors. (Chart 6)

Chart 5. Methods of checking the quality of product

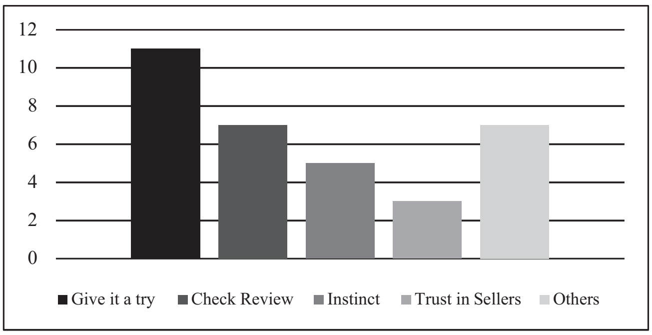
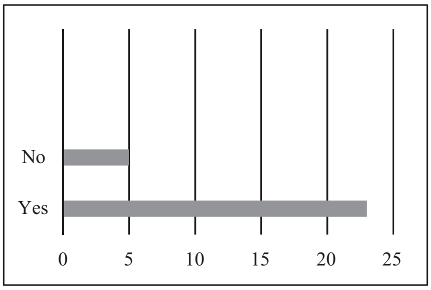


Chart 6. Disappointing Experiences




***The Online Food Market in Large Apartment Complexes***

In-depth interviews with two residents living in two large apartment complexes, one in Ho Chi Minh City and the other in Hanoi, has helped uncover a few threads running through the clients of the "online food vendors."

Mrs. Q (38 years old, married, office worker, 2 children) has lived in *Vinhomes Central 1 Complex* in Ho Chi Minh since August 2018. Mrs. H (40 years old, married, officer worker, 2 children) her family lived in *Thang Long No. 1 Complex* in Hanoi for a year and have recently moved to another, a little distance away from it. She offers an intriguing case, as shown below. After moving to the new place, H still makes use of the online food vendors through her friend, who has stayed in *Thang Long No. 1 Complex*. Both of these complexes consist of two building blocks and each has about 1000 apartment units. The residents are mostly in the middle-income bracket.

In these two complexes, online markets operate among their residents through Facebook. Administrators, also residents of the complexes, manage them. The residents sell and buy food, and occasionally other items, from each other.

One in Hanoi, *Thang Long No. 1*, has one official Facebook page for its online market -- *Cho Thang Long Number One* (hereafter Market-1), created in 5/2015. One in Ho Chi Minh, *Vinhomes Central 1*, has two Facebook pages for the two online markets: *Cho Cu Dan Vinhomes Central Park* (hereafter Market 2-a) since 7/2017, and *Cho online Cong Dong cu Dan Vinhomes Central Park* (hereafter Market 2-b) since 11/2017. The pages are open to the members only, and the administrators can approve requests for new membership.

The principal difference between the markets in these apartment complexes is that while Market-1 in Ha Noi strictly ban outside vendors from penetrating the group, Markets 2-a and 2-b in Ho Chi Minh welcome outside (non-resident) online vendors to join their operations. The difference may explain the larger members in the two pages in Ho Chi Minh: 57,255 members for Market 2-a, and 21,096 members for Market 2-b. Market 2-a's membership is almost three times larger than

Market 2-b, even though the former was created only four months earlier than the latter. Meanwhile, Market-1 in Hanoi has only 1301 members, although its history is twice as long as the Ho Chi Minh counterparts.

Table 1. Membership of Online Market as of November 20, 2019

| | Online Food Markets | Year of Creation | Members |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hanoi | Market-1 | 2015/ 5 | 1301 |
| Ho Chi Minh | Market-2-a | 2017/ 7 | 57,255 |
| | Market-2-b | 2017/11 | 21,096 |

Both Mrs. H and Mrs. Q are members of these pages. H, who strongly opposes outdoor markets because of unidentifiable origins of the food, was an active buyer at Market-1 while she and her family were the residents of the Hanoi apartment complex. She did most of her grocery shopping (breakfast, vegetables, meat, flowers, seafood) at Market-1 and did it almost every day. Even after she and her family moved to a nearby apartment complex, she has remained a loyal user of this market.

H finds this market really convenient because of “speedy delivery, availability and good quality,” and for that, she does not “care much about price.” When asked how she could make sure about the quality of the food, her trust in the market is absolute, although what of the market her trust is targeted remains ambiguous. For that trust’s sake, she vehemently opposes the idea of bringing outside vendors into this market because “it will be too difficult to control the quality of the product and service,” as she continues:

> “We trust each other because we are neighbors. If the vendors don’t provide good quality, they would be reported to the administrator and immediately removed from the market. They wouldn’t last if they don’t do it right. The administrators have ears everywhere.”[20]

By contrast, Mrs. Q is not as active as a member nor loyal to the market as H is because she has her favorite online vendors where she can purchase food from her hometown. She had joined the market (2-a) to get the sense of what things were like in the new environment *before* she moved in. She does not see any problem of having outside vendors operating in the market. She sees something else in the online food market. As she puts it: “What matters to me is the choices, more choices

[20] Mrs. H is nervous about her membership through a “proxy,” her friend who has remained in the apartment complex after she moved out and now resides in another complex not too far from Thang Long No. 1.

for customers. Customers will have more choices to choose from." In the meantime, she retains a degree of suspicion about these choices at the online food market, and traditional markets for that matter, because of the "difficulties in tracing" the origins of the food.

## An Observation:

"We trust each other because we are neighbors," says Mrs. H. However, the term "neighbor(s)" carries subtly vacillating meanings even to herself. Later, she says in one breath, "*I rarely saw the sellers* (vendors). *Even neighbors, we rarely see each other*". The first "neighbors" are the sellers who live under the same roof (the apartment complex) whom she does not know well. They are practically "stranger" to her. The second "neighbors" are the people living next door. They are merely her "nearby" neighbors, virtually no different from strangers.

A logical sequence of H's thinking is simple: because the vendors live in the same complex, they are her "neighbors"; they "are her neighbors," therefore, she trusts them; and because she trusts them, she trusts the food they provide. Her trust in the food quality has little to do with the food itself. Unbeknownst to herself, H entrusts the food safety to strangers, the "neighbors," who happen to live under the same roof. The principal *medium* for communication among these people, in other words, is the "roof" under which they all live. It is an almost accidental factor.

She has all the reasons for blocking any outside vendors from operating in this "online" market, for the addition of the outsiders would break down that communication medium. An irony is obvious – a clear distinction between those who are in and out makes even those "strangers," whom she has no knowledge other than the fact that they live in the same building, trustworthy. The critical decision for H to make is who is and is not living under the same roof. Judging from the strict policy of her favorite online market that excludes outside vendors, it is probably safe to assume that Mrs. H is not alone, and her logic is widely shared. When she and others make that decision, they are making another, perhaps more critical, decision on food safety.

Mrs. Q represents different thinking of the online market clients. They are a little more suspicious of the quality (safety) of the food they procure. Their suspicion also extends to the food from the traditional small-scale food markets. Yet they still make use of these markets that are "inferior" to supermarkets from the safety perspective (Charts 2, 3 and 4). What, then, do these clients find in the online food market that may compensate for the absence of assured food safety?

Mrs. Q's casual statement, cited above, is a clue: "more choices for the customers." Here, there is a compelling logic to these clients' use of online food markets. If controlling food quality is out of their reach, the clients would wish at least to have a broader range of choices (of food) which increases the chances of securing good choices (safe food).

Securing food safety is a complex process where rigorous monitoring would have to intervene in nearly all steps, from its production to consumption through distribution and preservation. That process is infinitely alien to ordinary people. Besides, the media coverage of food-related problems does little in alleviating the consumers' suspicion about the food specialists' (and the government) ability to secure food safety. "There is not much I can do" is the phrase that both Mrs. H and Mrs. Q repeated when asked about food safety. The customers are left, then, with only one alternative: increase the opportunities for a good choice to step in and, hopefully, at a minimum cost.

As Chart 1 shows, the users of the online markets are not turning away from the supermarkets. They are *adding* the online markets to the list of shopping sites. The online food market as the means to increase those opportunities for good choices has one advantage over the traditional markets. With the power of social media, accessible at any time from everywhere, the former does not demand any opportunity cost. The additional choices to choose from are available nearly cost-free.

There is something more to having a broader range of choices on hand. Q states casually: "I may not be able to control the quality of the product [food], but *I* can control the decision *I* make *if* given the available choices." Q accepts and has no choice other than trusting in the given living environment. However, she at least secures the freedom to exercise her own power of decision making. Trusting is, of course, risk-taking, as Niklas Luhmann has this observation:

> Trust ... always bears upon a critical alternative, in which the harm resulting from a breach of trust may be greater than the benefit to be gained from the trust proving warranted. Hence one who trusts takes cognizance of the possibility of excessive harm arising from the selectivity of others' actions and adopts a position towards that possibility."[21]

Q, in other words, may have run an inevitable cost-benefit calculation of securing safe food. Given an enormous and unpredictable cost of securing safe food, including even moving to different living accommodation, the calculation leads her to something that "satisfices" her multiple demands: a gain lying in the freedom to exercise her decision and another, not perfect but good enough a choice (food). The

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[21] Luhmann 2017, 27.

[22] See for the notion of "satisficing", which is an amalgam of satisfying and suffice (Simon 1978.) One significant consideration is necessary here: how central food safety is among the demands of everyday life. Q is active professionally, whereas H is more devoted to household maintenance. Food security may not consume Q's concerns as much as it does H's. See Vu 2020, chapter 6 on the discussion of "health" as part of demands in life.

total value of both may be less than the maximum but is sufficient.[22]

The question is now how the "online food market" *empower* people with a sense of control over their decision?

At supermarkets, customers ask workers only the location of the food, not *about* the food. Price is non-negotiable. It is one's decision to make a purchase or not, without further interaction for details.

People can be a great deal more interactive at traditional markets where customers have more opportunities to negotiate the price, as well as to inquire more details about the food they want to purchase. However, there is an odd sort of obligation that the clients need to observe in order for them to keep the traditional market owners loyal to them: no walking away empty-handed *after* physically examining the quality, and negotiating for the price, of the merchandise.

By contrast, online food vendors operate on an entirely different stage. They are without a "physical space" as the operators of the other two markets do. Instead, their unique platform for communication, social network services, assures them and their clients "the law of meeting again"[23], indispensable to sustaining reciprocal trust. With social network services, online vendors are free to appeal and reinforce their products' credibility without the limit of physical space and time. They are in the position of accumulating what Rachel Botsman calls "reputational capital"[24] 24-hours a day, and 7-days a week.

In the almost limitless loyalty of Mrs. H and the clients like her, the online vendors may see opportunities to exploit to their advantage. They are reminded, however, that Mrs. H's and others' trust could easily evaporate with one instance of suspicious merchandise in a transaction. Ironically, in other words, the clients' loyalty is the protection of their interest against the vendors' "breach" of trust.

Q and others like her appear to take all the responsibility for the consequences of a breached trust leaving the online vendors unscathed. The vendors are mindful, however, that Q and others like her, with the belief in the efficacy of their own decision, could easily walk away from the online vendors and look for other similar outlets for testing the efficacy of their decision. These clients may appear to be less loyal than H and others like her to the online vendors. However, their willingness to use the online vendors for testing their decision-making is something that the vendors do not take lightly. These clients' willingness to take chances of questionable merchandize *is* also willingness to look for other outlets.

The use of the online food market is an illustration of ordinary people's reliance on "trust" in others. As exhibited in Mrs. H and Mrs. Q, they sustain their use for reasons that appear more different than similar. However, what is common between the two is the effort to make one act, acquisition of food which is essential to

[23] Luhmann 2017, 41.

[24] See, for example, Botsman 2012.

everyday life, reducing the burden of nagging uncertainties that come with the living amidst strangers.

## A Conclusion:

The limited data on hand limits the extent to which we can uncover urban Vietnamese intricate ways of living among the “strangers”. They raise rather than answer some questions concerning the human relationship in corrected: a transitional society. The questions illuminate the primacy of communication in human relationships. What follows is a shortlist of such questions in place of conclusion.

The observations above may suggest that communication is part of an act of reducing the innate complexity in the living environment. The use of the online food market is a case where entrusting a greater portion of one’s decision-making responsibilities to others is part of everyday life if one were to live it, and not to be overwhelmed by it. What else is available for reducing the complexity when a blind conformism to those with various authorities – food security professionals or chemicals specialists -- has often proven futile?

The above observations also suggest that the platform for communication among the “strangers,” be it a supermarket or a busy street or a large apartment complex, may not dictate *how* we communicate. It is probably the other way around. The need to communicate, for whatever the purpose(s) may be, has more potent power in selecting, and even inventing, an appropriate platform for communication. That need is always with us. The advent of social network services is relatively a new phenomenon. What, then, may have been an equivalent of social network services in the pre-SNS era?

Mrs. Q’s behavior illuminates one significant point about our life. Not one demand, among many, of our life consumes our attention and care, a point that is particularly pressing for transitional and mobile urban Vietnamese. Job security, caring the ageing parents, securing a good school for children, among others, all consume considerable attentions and resources. Health does not dominate people’s mind. That point, however, can be easily lost in the belief that health, hence safe food, is most essential to our life. Against that belief, a public health specialist, Irwin Rosenstock cautions us that there is bound to be a sort of zero-sum relationship among the values we attach to any action and, therefore, “[a]ny attempt to increase the value of health may first entail decreasing the value of other dimensions of life.”[25] The chances are that there are times when health concerns justifiably consume anyone’s attention and available resources, and that there are times when health concerns take a back seat, so to speak, when other concerns dominate one’s mind. Are there platforms for communication appropriate for one purpose and not

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[25] Rosenstock 1960, 301.

for others?

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