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Mia Farang on YouTube: (Re)defining Thai Womanhood in the Network Society

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Abstract

This paper examines the notion of *mia farang* amid the COVID-19 pandemic. An analysis of *mia farang* YouTubers during this time reveals essential characteristics of the gendered and sexualized trope. Through Barker and Kuiper's (2014) lens on the globalization process, we postulate that women's voices during the peak of COVID-19 became more political, namely with regard to their quality of life compared to that in Thailand. Further, we argue that our textual analysis on three *mia farang* YouTubers (Yai Nee, Yai Nang, and Yai Chompoo) shows how the space of flows is a possible site for political criticism and negotiation towards their sexualized, gendered, and ethnic selves. Next, we argue that stereotypical elements of *mia farang* become much more complex by both challenging and reifying the tropes. Lastly, we emphasize Castells' (1999) notion of the space of flows still dominated by structure of the capitalist society as endorsed by the economy of YouTube.

1 Introduction

Contemporary Thai society has seen an increased visibility in the number of *mia farang*[1] on YouTube. Their popularity on social media, evident through the number of subscribers and views, not only speaks to their entertainment and commercial roles, but also deeply rooted, problematic social and cultural issues. In this research, we have selected three notable *mia farang* YouTubers, namely, Yai[2] Nee, Yai Nang, and Yai Chompoo.[3] These *mia farang* YouTubers caught our attention because, at the zenith of the COVID-19 pandemic (March–May of 2020), their vlogs abroad focused not only on their daily lives, but also critiqued the ruling regime of the Thai state, their homeland. They mainly vlog about their lifestyles along with foodcasting performances (known as *mukbang*).[4] While doing so, they manage to garner attention from their viewers transnationally. In response, viewers comment on the videos expressing their satisfaction, particularly pleased by their opulent manners of consumption that the majority of viewers in Thailand cannot enjoy.

Mia farang YouTubers are able to criticize the current ruling regime because of their geo-political locations. Yai Nee, Yai Nang, and Yai Chompoo all live in the Global North, namely Sweden, Denmark, and Australia, respectively. Through the new media platform, YouTube, they can interact with their viewers who reside transnationally. Due to the decentralized mode of communication, viewers can voice their destitute state of living, which further enhances the *mia farang* YouTubers' popularity. The reprimands towards the policies of the previous ruling regime (e.g., lack of state welfare, subsidy scheme, and freedom of expression) are enabled in the comment section. In parallel to the criticism made against the injustice that some of the viewers tangibly experience, other

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1 *Mia farang* is understood as a Thai woman in a relationship with foreign men (White/Caucasian), be it as a casual partner, a lawfully wedded wife, or a mistress. It should also be noted that the term is implicitly derogatory (see Sunanta and Angeles 2009). The authors wish to clarify that, in this research, *mia farang* is used in such a way that it shows a mode of struggle as well as its more contemporary meaning by which these women can be praised, too, if they succeed. This is the case for the three chosen YouTubers.

2 *Yai* is a title for a woman in the Isan (Northeastern) dialect.

3 Yai Nang's YouTube channel "Gin Pai Thai Rang":https://www.youtube.com/c/ginpaithairang Yai Nee's YouTube channel: "หนูนาสวีเดน แฟนฝรั่ง Noona Sweden" https://www.youtube.com /channel/UCZQ2uM3dTLCEFH4gWIswLvQ Chompoo's YouTube channel "Chompoo Sangchan":https://www.youtube.com/c/ChompooSangchan

4 *Mukbang,* originating in South Korea, is an act of communal eating performed on social media. *Mukbangers* gratify their viewers by savoring dishes or food and show their sensory thrills through words and facial expressions.

notions regarding *mia farang* YouTubers' lifestyles and mannerisms are also taken into consideration by the viewers.

These *mia farang* YouTubers have set a tone for a shift in notions of gender, namely, those surrounding womanhood. In Thai society, and particularly the Isan region, women are assigned demanding duties (Sunanta and Angeles 2009, 554), including responsibility for their kin and family, as well as filial piety. Isan women arguably face twice the struggle due to both gender expectations and their disadvantaged "ethnoregional" space (McCargo and Hongladarom 2021, 221). Sunanta and Angeles (2009, 549–559) further highlight that those residing in Isan are recipients of "economic marginalization" because wealth and resources are centralized in Bangkok, thereby economically and culturally disadvantaging Isan people on the periphery (McCargo and Hongladarom 2021, 219–234). Women who must care for their kin are willing to migrate to other countries or become engaged in transnational marriage and migration. By choosing to commit to a relationship with the Other, Thai women find ways to both fulfill their duties as daughters and challenge the normative socio-cultural expectations of their *sexed* identity (Sunanta and Angeles 2009; Mills 2017 and 2021).

In this way, these women are not to be viewed as mere passive subjects. Their decision to be with *farang*[5] men and relocate abroad means that, at some point, they can experience social mobility or "wealth" (Sunanta and Angeles 2009, 554) in a way they may not have been able to if they remained in Isan. Nonetheless, living abroad also comes with a certain form of symbolic precarity in that their dependence upon their partners can mean disparagement of their female selevs. Specifically, Kanchanachitra and Chuenglertsiri assert that migrant women may, at times, feel "under-appreciated," "insignificant," and in a "precarious situation" (Kanchanachitra and Chuenglertsiri 2021; Fresnoza-Flot 2021), as Thailand is not considered a "powerful nation state" (Kanchanachitra and Chuenglertsiri 2021), unlike the countries of their male partners.

The literature discussed above not only sheds light on *mia farang*s' complexity, but also makes the *mia farang* a legitimate subject of inquiry in light of persisting inequality in Thai society. As noted above, the self-representation of *mia farang* becomes more visible through networked communication, namely that on YouTube, making it a good site for us to gather data in order to see the shifts in their gendered subjectivities and unequal social order. Further, there have not been any studies on how *mia farang*s' subjectivities are mediated through social media. We are interested in how gender and inequalities are expressed through media, and particularly a site where users,

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5   *Farang* is a Thai term used to describe Caucasian people.

mia farang, and their followers from various locations can interact and form cultural meaning. This study thus aims to fill the knowledge gap in two ways. First, it seeks to situate *mia farang* in the emerging socio-spatial dynamics and, second, it investigates the extent to which the notion of *mia farang* and their gendered subjectivities are contested and challenged through YouTube.

2   Methodology

This study employs textual analysis as its research method. It examines in depth the video content and viewer remarks and discussion in the comment section. Textual analysis is a viable approach to examine the mediated relations between the YouTubers and their fans online or, as will be explicated further, on the network society. These nodes, the content creators and their viewers, are the main actors and hence our subjects of analysis as they have relative autonomy in producing and distributing content. In parallel, the act of watching, criticizing, and reflecting on the content on screen are constitutive of viewers' genuine behavior and ideas towards cultures and societies.

In a word, we attempt to find the cultural meanings that emerge from the interactions between the nodes through textual analysis. We selected three YouTubers, namely, Yai Nee, Yai Nang, and Yai Chompoo, all of whom have more than five hundred thousand subscribers on YouTube, which is considered substantial compared to other well-known *mia farang* YouTubers such as Yai Pen, Kung, Yai Wanpen, and Yai Supan who have fewer than three hundred thousand subscribers on their YouTube channels.[6] In addition, we have focused on the content created during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic (March-May 2020) in order to investigate the differing qualities of lives between *mia farang* and their followers through their mediated discussion. As the comments in the analysis section show, this selected period is of significance because Thai citizens' wellbeing was undeniably in a critical state and, therefore, the nodes took to the space of flows to exchange their views on governmental measures and policies.

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6   Yai Pen's YouTube channel
    "ยายเพ็ญ เมียฝรั่งบ้านนอก" https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCEZocygMqroXpK1WnDiTywA
    Kung's YouTube channel "เมียฝรั่ง เมมโมรี่ life in Germany"https://www.youtube.com/channel
    /UCtt2M-frCtF_QJjqo7u_PKw Yai Wanpen's YouTube channel "WanpenSwedenV1 Håkan
    Family ย่าวัญเพ็ญ สวีเดน"https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkdeHDJxczqlOwPT_gK8cpA Yai
    Supan's YouTube channel "สุพรรณ in UK language Isaan"https://www.youtube.com/channel
    /UC77iHCaKIzUu6lIPxbQE8Pw.

Further, these nodes will go on to first manifest how the network society enables connections amongst users from geographically dispersed communities. Second, we argue that the network society acts as a site where negotiations about the sexed subjects and the normative gendered expectations endemic in the Isan region take place.

3   Theoretical Framework

As the term *mia farang* represents an autonomous agent who resides in a Western country, we must examine the dynamics between gender, autonomy, and locationality. Barker and Kuiper (2014) propose that the process of globalization and its impacts impinge on individuals differently. Residing in a globalized locale does not guarantee the wellbeing of citizens. Aspects of stratification, feminization of labor, and democratic states therefore catch our attention. The intersectionality between gender, class, and global economy will be used as an approach to analyzing *mia farang* YouTubers.

This framework will allow us to decipher how "women occupy different positions in the globalization process" (Barker and Kuiper 2014, 2). *Mia farang* who exist on borders of the transnational space communicate with their homeland through the network community and their temporary visits to the home country. Their lived experiences reveal how women, as bearers of the economic globalization process, do not make up a unified group. Indeed, it is important to grasp: (1) the economic globalization from above and (2) the globalization from below, both of which involve the consequences and social forces amongst citizens of particular societies. This intersecting lens between gender, class, and location will be of use to see how *mia farang* exercise their agency[7] in their European host countries while remaining subjects of stereotypical gendered tropes in this economy of desire and body.

Globalization from above reflects major collaboration amongst countries and regions, while globalization from below encourages the overcoming of societal issues bearing impact from economic globalization. Relevant issues include patriarchal structure, pauperism, and oppressive stratification. Barker and Kuiper further suggest that societies produce inequalities from globalization from above, by which decision making processes, resource

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7   In this paper, we use Blackman's (2021) term "agency," which we understand to denote how an individual has a "capacity to resist, negotiate or refuse the workings of disciplinary power" (p. 37) that regulates us, in this case, through the dominant narrative concerning genders and ethnicities.

allocation, and structural gains are carried out by the selected few. As a result, this produces inequality in many aspects of citizens' lives, such as income, wellbeing, and career opportunities.

Women, as a result, are bearers of the impacts of globalization that are uneven and unfairly distributed from above. On top of this, as Mohanty (2006) suggests, endemic gendered characteristics and deep-rooted norms prevent women from exercising and enjoying status as autonomous agents (Mohanty 2006). The notion of globalization from below, therefore, proposes the endorsement of social equity and human rights whereby women, men, and quite simply everyone in the society can be free or at least "ameliorate[d] [from] the unfavorable consequences for women and marginalized men of globalization from above" (Barker and Kuiper 2014, 3).

Further, drawing on bell hooks' renowned intersectionality approach, Barker and Kuiper's (2014) proffer urges re-consideration of the "narrative of progress" in a globalized and heightened capitalist society (Barker and Kuiper 2014, 4). Here, we see criticism addressed towards citizens who are often marginalized and thereby "remain excluded from the decision-making processes" (Barker and Kuiper 2014, 4).

Mia farang, as actors and agents along transnational borders, will display through their personalized narratives on YouTube, especially through forms of labors and criticisms made towards the societal inequality in their home country. Criticisms are made particularly of the economic climate of neoliberal capitalism and the logic of individualism. On top of their local gendered expectations, *mia farang* YouTubers are analyzed through lenses of gender, class, and location within the global economy, which leaves no parties un-criticized. Altogether, this approach will be used to grasp the impact of the un-democratic economic globalization at home and the unjust gendered conventions which ultimately lead to *mia farang*'s plight abroad as an autonomous agent.

Furthermore, these *mia farang* who mediate their stories online make use of the Internet in such a way that they capitalize their cultural content. Unlike mass media audiences in the traditional media era who were entangled in the mass media *versus* audience dichotomy (Castells 2009, 355–406), YouTubers are turned into "nodes" (Castells 2013, 19) with relative autonomy, who are able to create, distribute, and monetize their own content. As they successfully garner attention from millions of viewers, *mia farang* YouTubers become a connecting point allowing interaction between nodes from various localities (at the regional, national, and global levels) to take place. The pervasiveness of interacting and exchanging information in a horizontal manner leads to a formation of networks. The emerging conditions in the 21st century thus

profoundly transform the characters of communication and, subsequently, society, which, here, can be defined as a network society (Castells 1997, 15; Castells 2000, 696).

Castells (2013, 19) writes that the network society cannot perform effectively despite the fact that it allows communication to occur in a horizontal manner. This means that the network society cannot outperform the existing hierarchical structures, such as that of the communication institution or mass media institution. Whilst Castells believes that the network society is comparable to that of the social structure comprising a plethora of networks (such as groups of friends in scattered places), the author also believes that the network society and its relation to the societal structure is ever changing and transcending a fixed time. In his words, "the network can deploy itself fully, transcending the historical limit" (Castells 2013, 19).

In light of the socio-spatial logic noted above, Castells also coins the term "the space of flows," which refers to the material arrangements that allow the simultaneity of social practices without territorial contiguity. He further underscores how physical spaces (e.g., a clearly demarcated territorial space) do not cease to exist in the network society. While these physical spaces are not eliminated, they have been challenged more and more by the ascendency of networks (Castells 1999, 302; Castells 2013, 18).

In other words, self-produced content and interactions among nodes from scattered physical localities can now be connected and united in a horizontal manner. In this regard, Castells asserts that the space of flows becomes a site of contestation for ordinary people, in this case, the online space, namely YouTube. He postulates that "the grassrooting of the space of flows" (Castells 1999, 302; Castells 2013, 18) or a "bottom-up" social change has greater leverage when the networks of ordinary users are extensively expanded. These users expanded their network through self-produced media, which effectively earns them more capital and power, while they are challenged by the networks of interconnected nodes beyond territorial boundaries. However, as will be shown in the analysis, we will argue that the "grassrooting of the space of flows" is somewhat simplistic as it tends to gloss over the ongoing paradoxes within a networked economy that is driven by global media corporations and has the potential to reproduce gendered and ethnic stereotypes.

In this study, we thus locate *mia farang* YouTubers among the tension and friction within the network society and in between the globalization from below and from above. The emerging socio-spatial and globalization dynamics allow neoliberal economy, communication, technologies, gender, and class to intersect and potentially contradict one another.

4 Analysis

4.1 *Gender Roles and Transnational Isanness*

Yai Nang, Yai Chompoo, and Yai Nee share two main commonalities which are inherently gendered and sexualized, reiterating the process of the gendering of the selves and empowerment (i.e., exercising their full female agencies). The three *mia farang* all retain the traditional gender attributes endemic in the Isan region, even while living abroad. Additionally, they can transgress the "traditional" gendered expectations because of the geopolitical region in which they reside. The latter aspect will unveil how their feminine selves act as a source of capital that can mediate both the bodily work and the gendered bodies of being feminine.

The three *mia farang* YouTubers often assume roles that are conventionally deemed as feminized, including caring for domestic tasks such as tending to their children, spouses, and housework. Because these gendered labors are mediated, they are associated with their own cooked meals and them eating live on their channels. It is very plausible that the mediation of gendered labor plays a role in reproducing the stereotypical trope of Asian wives living in the transnational space.

Despite receiving praised for how they enjoy meals and, at times, their opulent ingredients, such as endless supplies of salmon and fresh shrimp, it is undeniable that our subjects of analysis are active agents in perpetuating gendered roles closely connected to the feminization of labor and attributes. One such example can be found in a comment on Yai Nee's YouTube video which states that "Noo Na is very pretty. Yai Nee eats very deliciously and the food looks very elitist You have such a lovely husband."[8] Another instance involves the comment, "Andreas (Yai Nee's husband) is good at cooking." The comment specifically reproaches Yai Nee that she should not look down on her husband's skills, "Just be supportive and let him try to cook."[9]

Additionally, the fact that their food preparation is partially streamed on their channel reconnects them with the roots of their home country. Most of their food is eaten with bare hands, which emphasizes "authenticity," or a genuine way of eating in the Isan region of Thailand. The rekindling with their *Isanness* can also be seen through the choice of ingredients that have to be purchased specifically from an Asian store such as *pakia speciosa* (in Thai: สตอ) or fermented fish sauce (in Thai: น้ำปลาร้า). This particular rekindling of Isan

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8 In Thai, the comment reads: หนูนาน่ารักจุๆยายนีกินแซบๆไอโซพรั้งอีสานมีสามีทีแสนดีมากๆๆ.

9 In Thai, the comment reads: แอนเดรียส ได้เรื่องมากเลยเก่งมาก เมียสอนก็จำได้ดีเลย ยายนีไปว่าเค้าทำไมเค้าหัดทำ จะเร็วไปไหน ด่าว่าตัวไม่ดีนะ อยู่เฉยๆดีกว่า ให้เค้าทำ.

characteristics further compares and contrasts Isan with its Other, the West. Regarding chicken feet, for instance, Yai Nang's husband remarks that that part is not edible for "them," but for Notheasterners, the ingredient is valuable, especially given the effort it takes to find such ingredients.

The connection with *Isanness* as mediated through *mia farang*'s channels, too, is done in such a way that it can act as a source of their self-indulgent goal. In other words, they are reinforcing the most banal Isan manners, such as that of Isan dishes, dialect usage, and even gendered selves, but at the same time, these Isan attributes are portrayed through their neoliberal selves, which are freer and more autonomous economically as well as sexually. (Yai Nee's charming physical appearance is a case in point.) Achieving autonomous subjectivity while traversing back to the parochial in an affluent manner is something that cannot be gained in the local context in which perhaps economic marginalization and a disadvantageous geopolitical area like Isan and its distance from the capital may be a hindrance (Fresnoza-Flot 2020).

These compositions connect these *mia farang* and their home country in such a way that they repeat the localized and feminized way domestic matters, namely, food preparation, household chores, and caretaking of their spouses and children are arranged. However, at the same time, their feminine labor is also rewarded and commended with affluence that could be seen both on their table as well as on their feminine bodily selves.

This brings us to the second commonality shared by the three *mia farang* YouTubers. That is, they utilize their bodies to exercise their exuberant selves and strengthen the notion of bodies as resources for capital. Yai Nang and Yai Nee have launched their own products in relation to the beautification of the feminine self. The former owns and sells serum that promises to provide youthful, translucent, and whiter skin, while the latter sells and advertises her own collagen-infused drinks. The audience provide positive feedback by commenting on their looks: "Your face is so much clearer and more beautiful. How do you take care of yourself?"[10]; "Your face looks so much better, so much clearer. Let me know how you care for it"[11]; and as straightforwardly as "Yai Nee is very beautiful".[12]

In the process, on their channels, these *mia farang* draw attention to their facial features and corporeal physique. All are the result of using their own products and, certainly, living in the Western countries where their living conditions are comparatively much better than in their home country.

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10   In Thai, the comment reads: หน้าใสขึ้น สวยขึ้นเยอะเลย บำรุงอย่างไรคะ.

11   In Thai, the comment reads: หน้าเจิดดีขึ้นเยอะเลยคะบอกต่อความใสด้วยคะ.

12   In Thai, the comment reads: ยายนีสวยมากๆ.

Specifically with respect to the division of labor mentioned above, these *mia farang* are able to enjoy the prerogatives of their physically lighter workloads, including the comparatively better economic capital and resources they gain from their geopolitical situatedness and ties with their consorts.

4.2   *The Ambiguous Appraisals: Life Quality Amid the Pandemic and the Feminine Selves*

In relation to the aforementioned economic capital, the three YouTubers' wellbeing is also narrated through their voices. It is necessary that we highlight how the discussion on the democratic regime is expressed by these Isan women in the transnational space. Yai Nang, Yai Nee, and Yai Chompoo all discuss the earlier impacts of COVID-19. Through the lens of economic globalization, it is evident that these women YouTubers' quality of life is much better than that those who watch them. In the following remarks, the viewers express the differences that stem from the uneven globalized economy:

> Thailand is still praying to get rid of COVID-19. Yai Nang does not need to worry because the COVID-19 pandemic will ease because of dhamma.[13]
> Thailand is in its worst state. The number of infected patients has risen to the thousands. Doctors also contract the virus. Medical equipment is not enough. The economy is bad, and merchants are in a destitute state. But we have to keep fighting, and we will defeat it [COVID-19].[14]
> I love that in your videos, you keep us up to date on the current situation where you live as well. I believe your words more than the news and media. You give a more accurate sense to detail on how life is currently with the pandemic and sheltering in place (Commented originally in English).

The discrepancies in state-provided welfare that citizens ought to receive during dire economic circumstances is expressed explicitly and implicitly by the YouTubers themselves and their fans. The Isan women's voices along with (the majority of) their audience make up the network society that together lambasts the Thai government's actions towards alleviating the spread of COVID-19.

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13   In Thai, the comment reads: ประเทศไทยนั่งสวดไล่โควิดอยู่ครับยายไม่ต้องเป็นห่วงโควิดน่าจะสงบได้เพราะฟังธรรมะ.

14   In Thai, the comment reads: คุณยายขา..ประเทศไทยตอนนี้ย่ำแย่มากค่ะ ยอดผู้ป่วยเป็นพันแล้วค่ะ หมอก็ติดเชื้อ เครื่องมือการแพทย์บางที่ก็ไม่เพียงพอ เศรษฐกิจก็ตกต่ำ พ่อค้าแม่ค้าก็ขาย ไม่ค่อยมีกินเลยค่ะ แต่เราก็ต้องสู้ต่อไปค่ะเราต้องชนะมันค่ะ.

*Mia Farang*s' voices can be political. As reviewed in existing scholarly works on Isan women and their expected gendered performances, they are oftentimes placed in a position that is deemed feminine and therefore unattached to the politics of the country. Such a division of gendered labors in the Isan region demands that they fall in line with filial piety and devotion to their kin, both physically and monetarily. Interracial marriages are thus a welcome source of prestige that would benefit any Isan family (Angeles and Sunanta 2009; Sunanta and Angeles 2021; Kanchanachitra and Chuenglertsiri 2021).

Mia farang YouTubers provide a case of women speaking straightforwardly and directly on the security within the social sphere of which they are deprived. This is akin to the perspective of globalization from below where societal issues are discussed by the oppressed and those who are positioned at the margins. By tackling the lack of care that the Thai state provided during the pandemic, these women YouTubers expose the oppressive stratification that only the already oppressed and the already marginalized Thais must face. Unlike the opportunities that these YouTubers find in the West, the audience at home has a chance to reflect upon and imagine their possible selves, their greater feminine agencies abroad which their home country cannot provide, let alone assist with. Comments such as the following are evident in this case: "You speak our hearts. I am tearing up. Many do not have enough to eat so much so that we must save the leftovers for later meals. There are those who do not have anything to eat. They eat raw papaya instead of rice. This tortures me. Yai Nang, you think well".[15]

Nonetheless, the audience criticizes their feminized selves that are now entwined with political issues, such as those concerning welfare and monetary measures. The audience especially remarks on benefits these YouTubers receive from their host countries. While some really do appreciate the discussion of their quality of life and the country's actions surrounding the pandemic, the YouTubers are unavoidably subjected to stereotypical gendered tropes that at times border on the devaluation of their agencies. Some of the comments read as follows:

> Your daughter is quite like you. She may be selling herself at the beer bars just like the mother.[16]

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15   In Thai, the comment reads: พูดได้โดนใจคะนำตาไหลเลยนึกถึงคนไม่มีจะกินเมือก่อนกินอะเหลือก้อจะทิ้งก้นพอถึงตอนนี้ต้องเก็บไว้อีกมือคะ มีคนที่เขาอดจริงๆคะต้องกินมะละกอดิบๆๆแต่นั้นแทนข้าวทำให้เราคิด ได้หดหู่ใจคะยายยังคิดดีคะ.

16   In Thai, the comment reads: ลูกไม้หล่นใกล้ต้นจริงๆแรดเหมือนแม่อีกหน่อยก่ขายหอยเหมือนแม่ตามบาร์เบียร์.

> Yai Nee, I am not annoyed by watching your videos. Your husband is very nice … A family man. Are there any more good ones?[17]

Such comments are derogatory at times, yet they manifest the tension and dilemma of wanting to have a better life while viewing feminized Thai selves as inferior in terms of romantic relations. It could be said then that, although connections are formed between the nodes, i.e., the YouTubers and the viewers, transnationally, they come together to censure and compare their qualities of life amid the ambiguous appraisal whereby viewers both envisage their lives to be similar to what they view online and also fetishize the clichéd feminized images that are forever plastered on the notion of *mia farang*.

4.3 *Entrepreneurial Transnational Housewives: Traversing the Notion of Mia Farang in the Contradictory Space of Flows*

The prominent themes found among the YouTubers include displaying Isan delicacies and performing Korean-influenced *mukbang*. *Mia farang* YouTubers gratify their viewers by savoring Isan dishes and showing their sensorial thrills (Kim 2021, 110) through words and facial expressions. In response, the viewers leave comments expressing their satisfaction caused by an act of watching. Apart from the gustatorial elements (Choe 2019, 173; Schwegler-Castañer 2018, 783) found in their videos, these *mia farang* also engage heavily in commercial activities, namely, building a loyal fanbase to enhance their promotional content. Considering the emerging form of self-produced media and participatory culture (Burgess 2008), this section investigates how and to what extent the notion of *mia farang* is challenged through networked communication embedded in a transnational global economy, specifically through Castells' postulation on the network society and space of flows.

The previous section has already highlighted how the symbolic meanings of *Isanness* and an ideal wife (i.e., being a good wife and good mother) are reproduced in their YouTube videos. While the process of reproducing norms certainly occurs, we assert that, paradoxically, in the space of flows, these norms are simultaneously negotiated. As the following analysis will illustrate, through the commercial and networked transnational space, *mia farang* YouTubers can traverse and play with their subjectivity, which brings about negotiation and preservation of the notion of *mia farang*.

Far from being ordinary users or nodes in the space of flows, the analysis shows that *mia farang* are, in fact, hubs within networks, who strategically

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17   In Thai, the comment reads: ยายคะไม่รำคาญจ้าคนดูเข้าใจค่ะ Your husband very nice … Family man. มีเหลืออีกมั้ยคะผัวดีดีแบบนี้.

maneuver stereotypes to serve their own ends. Attempts to build and maintain attention from their viewers attest to this argument. Through *mukbang* performance, their fans are encouraged to interact with the YouTubers via likes, comments, and subscriptions. To maintain their fanbase, their followers/ viewers are normally addressed as *fan club* (fans).

It is common for the *mia farang* to start their video with greetings in either central Thai or Isan dialect in order to invite their fans to virtually join their Isan feasts while they are dining alone or with family members at home. For instance, in most videos, Yai Chompoo greets her followers "*hima hima hima*"[18] (an expression in Isan dialect used for inviting others to join an activity) while Yai Nang usually says "let's eat together"[19] before starting her *mukbang* performance. Furthermore, in order to maintain interactions and flows of information, the YouTubers regularly remind viewers to click "like" and subscribe to their channels, such as in, "if you like the video, please click like and share for me"[20] at the beginning of the videos or greet their fans in an amicable manner by saying "hello to my fans!".[21] Similarly, in one video, Yai Chompoo expresses her concerns over the well-being of her followers during the COVID-19 pandemic saying, "many of my fans lost their jobs and had to return home in the upcountry".[22] They strategically employ affordances of YouTube such as the "like" and comment features, creating a participatory culture that maintains interactions among viewers (Lange 2009, 71) that is paramount to the existence of networks.

Furthermore, as discussed in the previous section, all *mia farang* capitalize on their popularity by integrating promotional content (selling their own products or endorsing other products) into their channels. They monetize interactions among nodes (YouTubers and viewers) which occur within the networks.

In this regard, rather than merely representing themselves in the space of flows, the analysis suggests that these *mia farang* are enterprising YouTubers. Equipped with economic and cultural resources, they tap into the information economy (Castells 1997, 6–16) fostered by the global media corporation Google (who owns YouTube). In doing so, the YouTubers capitalize on existing tropes, namely *Isanness* and "the good wife", and the popular *mukbang* culture. These

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18   In Thai, the comment reads: หิมา หิมา หิมา.

19   In Thai, the comment reads: มากินด้วยกันค่ะ.

20   In Thai, the comment reads: ชอบอันไหนฝากกดไลก์กดแชร์ด้วยเด้อ.

21   In Thai, the comment reads: สิทักทายน้าๆปู่ๆๆแฟนคลับ.

22   In Thai, the comment reads: แฟนคลับตกงานกลับบ้านนอก.

cultural resources are strategically employed to draw attention from their fans in Thailand and elsewhere.

The entrepreneurship noted above underlines how the YouTubers successfully acquire the "network-making power" crucial to a network society (Castells 2013). In this study, *mia farang*'s network-making power works in tandem with the commercialization of YouTube. Network-making capabilities allow the *mia farang* YouTubers to concurrently connect with their fans on a global scale, forge their entrepreneurial transnational subjectivity, and negotiate with the trope of *mia farang*.

In a word, *mia farang* YouTubers employ power acquired through the network to turn themselves into housewife entrepreneurs who play an active role in the transnational economy. Through the entrepreneurial activities and network-making power, their housewife duties and mundane activities at home are turned into capital that can serve their own economic ends (e.g., generating revenue from product placements).

The emerging socio-spatial dynamic thus enables the vloggers (as non-professionals) to transgress the widely held notion of *mia farang* from the poverty-stricken region of Isan who are deemed inferior and whose main duty is to simply look after their family. Access to resources and opportunities enables them to "play" with their subjectivity and venture out on being entrepreneurs, yet they are also YouTube "co-creators" whose entrepreneurial practices are still regulated by the platform's business logic (Burgess 2006, 5–6; Burgess and Green 2009, 94–96; Burgess and Green 2018; Lange 2019, 3). This can be seen through the manipulation of ethnic gendered and sexualized selves amongst the three *mia farang*'s channels, which effectively reproduces the feminization of the selves and the portrayal of the feminine labors through their mediated narration.

The hierarchy among Isan women is thus engendered. On one hand, our selected *mia farang* YouTubers, who are well equipped with resources, are able to acquire power through the space of flows and alter the dominant norm through their entrepreneurial practices, such as selling and endorsing products and monetizing their content (*mukbang*). On the other hand, fans residing in Thailand (particularly those who specify in the comment section that they are also from Isan) with much fewer resources become mere nodes or fans according to Castells' argument (Castells 2013, 19). It is important to note that the possession of resources plays a crucial part in these Isan women's ascendency to neoliberal subjectivity. In other words, women who lack resources stand less of a chance in becoming entrepreneurial subjects, while those with greater dividends access opportunities in exercising their autonomous selves and, hence, monetizing the commerciality of their YouTube channels.

In this regard, rather than bringing about social change and more equality, the space of flows appears to help maintain a hierarchical relationship between Isan women YouTube entrepreneurs living in affluent Western societies *vis a vis* Isan women who are left destitute in Thailand. We assert that this debunks Castells' (1999, 302) utopic notion of the "grassrooting" of the space of flows in the sense that the network society does indeed bring about communal conversation amongst Isan women, yet the very same network also stratifies the women in such a way that there can never be a unified group of Isan women. The analysis done in this part therefore shows the struggle over the meaning of *mia farang* in the space of flows. We also want to underscore that the meaning of *mia farang* can both reify gendered conventions, and, at the same time, give rise to women's autonomous selves. All of this is conditioned by the structural constraints and, as clearly evidenced by our case study, the media platform and network society.

5   Conclusion

This project has shed light on the re-defining of the notion of *mia farang*. We argue that *mia farang* and its definition affirm the gendered and regional normative expectations among Isan women. At the same time, the notion of *mia farang* is expanded when situated in the space of flows. However, we note that not all Isan women, both offline and online, can achieve autonomy in terms of the economy of desire and body. The socio-spatial dynamics in the network society allows their feminine labor selves on YouTube, yet this neoliberal self is contingent upon the possession of resources and commercial imperatives, i.e., the economy of YouTube.

By investigating the content of a group of *mia farang* YouTubers at the peak of the pandemic, it becomes clear that the content is beyond mere entertainment. It is political. It is undeniable that Thai society is "demanding" (Angeles and Sunanta 2009, 549–574). Daughters, particularly, from the Isan region must care for their kin and families. Women's roles and statuses, as delineated above, have been de-politicized. Yai Nee, Yai Nang, and Yai Chompoo's content, however, brings to the forefront the ways in which they use their voices as women to compare the government aid and welfare between their home country and the Western societies, which they, as transnational wives, receive. It is in this light that we argue that their content released during the earlier months of 2020, the zenith of the pandemic, enables the various nodes, specifically from their home country, to imagine the lives, the selves,

and the qualities that they could have gained if the state and the government had handled the COVID-19 pandemic differently.

Lastly, the study shows that a hierarchical structure still dominates the space of flows (Fuchs 2007; 2009). However, it also illuminates how power operates in a dynamic manner. The socio-spatial form indeed enables the challenge towards the dominant meanings of *mia farang,* yet, simultaneously, hierarchies in terms of ethnicities and genders are still preserved. This leads us to the first contradictory characteristic of the space of flows: the stereotype of the *mia farang* is simultaneously both broadened and repeated. That is, it is broadened through their entrepreneurial activities, while its gendered tropes are reiterated. *Mia farang* from Isan can thus challenge their inferior status by establishing an autonomous and entrepreneurial self; however, the findings show that *mia farang* still need to rely on the familiar stereotypes of Isan women. In this light, the gendered and ethnic stereotypes are further reinforced. Essentially, the space of flows performs a contradictory function in which it both enables challenges made towards dominant (gendered) norms and, at the same time, helps preserve the social and cultural hierarchy. The second contradiction is that not all Isan women can attain such an entrepreneurial status. Although ordinary users or nodes with relative autonomy can take part in YouTube's commerciality, not all can become an established node who can profit from the networks like the selected *mia farang* YouTubers. *Mia farang* who live in an affluent society where globalization affects the individuals in the society equally have access to much more resources, be it time, monetary means, or welfare. These resources are paramount to those who wish to tap into and execute the YouTube economy. Due to the lack of resources, a chance for ordinary Isan women in Thailand to acquire entrepreneurial status and monetary gains through YouTube is largely limited. Ultimately, the space of flows does not bring about equality. Rather, it reinforces stratification among Isan women, consequently leading to the symbolic censure of the mishandling of citizen welfare by the state and the unequal effects of globalization, while actual change remains to be seen.

Acknowledgments

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