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To cite this article: Thi Gammon & Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan (2026) Hate content and gendered shaming in Vietnamese social media: the case study of Trấn Thành, *Celebrity Studies*, 17:3, 457-475, DOI: [10.1080/19392397.2025.2545261](https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2025.2545261)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2025.2545261>



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Hate content and gendered shaming in Vietnamese social media: the case study of Trần Thành

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ABSTRACT

Few Vietnamese showbiz artists have enjoyed the same success as Trần Thành, an entertainer with a thriving career in television and filmmaking. One of the most popular Vietnamese artists, Trần Thành has also endured immense hate. In March 2023, at a press meeting, Trần Thành bemoaned with tears the misery of being a high-profile figure, insisting that 'being an artist is much more difficult than you may think'. Rather than garnering sympathy, however, he was subsequently met with criticisms from members of the public, who ridiculed him for his perceived lack of modesty and ingratitude towards his privilege as a successful entertainer. He also got derided for his failure to conceal emotions, thus failing to observe societal expectations of 'tough' masculinity. Through a discourse analysis of impactful Facebook posts discussing this press event and of netizens' reactions to these posts, this paper identifies the discursive strategies used to ridicule and shame Trần Thành. It reveals the reasons behind the backlash: an expectation for entertainers to remain humble and conform to norms. The paper contributes to the literature on digital hate content in Vietnam, which receives little scholarly attention, and the broader international scholarship on celebrity culture and online shaming.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 December 2023

Accepted 9 June 2025

KEYWORDS

Trần Thành; hate content; shaming; Vietnam; framing

Introduction

Since the internet's widespread availability, it has become a fertile ground for real-time hate dissemination. Unlike offline hate, cyber hate enables the de-responsibilisation of hate content by providing online users with anonymity (through fake accounts) or offering a sense of anonymity (the lack of consequences for producing hate content) (Kilvington 2021). With such lack of accountability, cyberspace motivates many people to become more aggressive than they otherwise would be in real life and take part in practices which upset others, such as ridiculing and insulting (Suler 2004, Cheng *et al.* 2017, Kilvington 2021). These hate practices are often linked to shaming. Shaming of behaviours, particularly those violating norms, is a form of surveillance and social monitoring to reinforce societal norms and beliefs (Skoric *et al.* 2010, Klang and Madison 2016).

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Hate content is a pervasive global digital phenomenon, and Vietnam is no exception. The country now hosts 70 million internet users, many of whom use social media on a daily basis (Luu *et al.* 2021). This article explores the patterns of hate content in the Vietnamese cybersphere through a case study of the shaming of Trần Thành, a comedian, actor, director, and television host. One of the most high-profile entertainers in Vietnamese showbiz with millions of followers on social media (including 18 million on Facebook as of November 2023), Trần Thành, now in his late thirties, is also among the most hated figures due to various reasons: being too successful and influential (more than he is perceived to deserve), too present (he shows up on television so often that his image becomes mundane, or *nhàm* as the Vietnamese say), too effeminate, etc. Trần Thành is known for his tendency to cry (*mau nước mắt*), which earned him the nickname ‘Thành Cry’, among other similar nicknames.

This study explores public reactions to Trần Thành’s sobbing and speech during a promotion event for ‘Glorious Fame’ (*Hào quang rực rỡ*), a film project about the rise to fame of Đàm Vĩnh Hưng, a popular pop singer. The event took place on 21 March 2023. During a talk, as the event’s host, Trần Thành sobbed and said, ‘being an artist is much more difficult to digest than what you [audiences] may think; whoever wants money and fame, please come here to . . . (pauses, choked with emotion), to taste Glorious Fame, taste it and see what it feels like’. (*Đời nghệ sĩ khó nuốt hơn quý vị nghĩ rất nhiều. Nếu ai cảm thấy thích tiền, thích hào quang thì mời lên đây để nếm thử bốn chữ ‘hào quang rực rỡ’ đi rồi biết nó là cái gì*). This ‘incident’ occurred within the same month of an earlier perceived ‘scandal’ in which Trần Thành was accused of abusing his power to rent an exclusive screening room at a cinema for himself and his entourage (Dương 2023), earning another nickname, ‘Mr Privacy’. While Trần Thành’s moment of vulnerability seems trivial, this (non-)‘event’ is deemed newsworthy by media outlets due to public attention to him.

Informed by the framing theory, this article examines two datasets: first, posts produced by news pages (those linked to state-owned newspapers) and user-generated pages on Facebook, the most popular social media platform in Vietnam, hosting over 66 million accounts (Việt Anh 2023, Gammon and Phan 2024a); second, the comments below these posts. Both the posts and comments were created in late March 2023. Through discourse analysis of the data, the article probes the cultural reasons behind the backlash against Trần Thành’s crying and his aforementioned statement, which include societal expectations of men to be (physically and mentally) ‘strong’ and of artists to be humble towards their success. By unravelling the discursive strategies Facebook pages and users deployed to discuss Trần Thành’s vulnerability, this study sheds light on the production and consumption of hate content and gendered shaming in Vietnamese digital space, which has received little scholarly attention despite their potential to reveal important implications such as the impacts of norms and surveillance. Although there has been an emergence of research on social media in Vietnam, especially regarding civil society, activism, and consumption (e.g. Nguyen *et al.* 2016, Nguyen-Thu 2018, Luong 2021), qualitative work addressing toxic digital content is hard to find. Rare examples are Nguyen’s (2019) master’s thesis about the online shaming of a Vietnamese beauty pageant winner and Gammon and Phan’s (2024a) commentary article on the racist backlash against the film *The Little Mermaid* (2023) and its black lead actress on Vietnamese social media. The present article seeks to fill this serious gap while responding to the call for greater attention to celebrity culture in Asia, which remains under-researched despite Asia being the world’s most populous continent with flourishing entertainment industries (Xu *et al.* 2021).

Background of the study

Social media in Vietnam

Situated in Southeast Asia, Vietnam is a developing country with an approximate population of 100 million. Following the 1986 *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) policy, Vietnam has adopted a 'socialist-oriented market economy' model marked by the liberalisation of its economy and integration into global trade under the communist party's control. Within this framework, all domestic news outlets remain state institutions subject to the government's regulation. While the state has never loosened its grip on coverage of political issues, it has allowed the press much more freedom in reporting non-political affairs, including tabloid stories (Pettus 2004, Duong 2016). Tabloidisation is correlated to the lack of serious political and social news because the press needs to exhaust sensational entertainment stories to attract and detain readers while they are only allowed limited freedom to cover political matters, especially those concerning high-ranking state officials' corruption (Duong 2016). Furthermore, tabloid content is easy to produce and helps distract readers from national affairs (Duong 2016). Even newspapers known for heavy propaganda jump on this tabloidisation trend (Duong 2016) and many newspapers have established official pages on social media, most likely Facebook. Stories about sex, crimes and 'soft news' such as gossip and celebrities' private lives have therefore dominated local cyberspace.

While the state has maintained its strict control of mainstream news outlets, it has allowed citizens relative freedom to use Western social media platforms while keeping an eye on political discussions by enforcing the Cybersecurity Law since 2018 (Nguyen-Thu 2018). This marks a notable difference from China, from which Vietnam borrowed much of its political strategies. China has blocked major Western online platforms such as Google, Facebook, Wikipedia and YouTube while providing its citizens with domestic online platforms (Nguyen-Thu 2018). As the government mostly turns a blind eye to the tabloidisation of its state-owned outlets, it has also ignored discussions of non-political matters online, however toxic they might become. The proliferation of user-generated (*tự phát*) Facebook pages with no link to official newspapers has facilitated the spread of fake news, rumours, and trivial stories about celebrities. These pages are often managed by anonymous administrators and do not adopt strict ethics principles. Many of such pages draw millions of followers who are curious about celebrities' personal lives including that of Trần Thành. Micro-stories about Trần Thành, such as 'news' of his buying an exclusive screening room or sobbing at a press event in March 2023, are hardly shocking. Yet, because of Trần Thành's high-profile status, these trivial stories, or non-news, become news. Anything that feeds the public's continuous attention to Trần Thành, especially one that may trigger negative reactions, cannot escape news coverage and social media discussions.

Entertainers' relationship to the public

In capitalist societies, celebrities are treated as commodities, i.e. exchangeable objects (Gamson 1994, Turner 2004, Rockwell and Giles 2009, Marshall 2014, 2021). As Marshall (2014, p. 6) puts it, 'the celebrity exists above the real world, in the realm of symbols that gain and lose value like commodities in the stock market'. Making money from their constructed personas, famous people blur the line between commodity and personhood. Consequently, they suffer from the dehumanising effects of fame: to ordinary people, they

may appear more like consumer products than human beings. As celebrities live under intense public surveillance, their private lives become newsworthy and their images are 'devoured by a hungry public' (Rockwell and Giles 2009, p. 203). Rockwell and Giles's 2009 interview study reveals how famous people undergo a depersonalising process in which they lose ownership of their lives and feel 'owned by the public' (p. 203). Because celebrities represent privilege, hating celebrities and following news of their misdeeds and scandals gives ordinary people a momentary feeling of power and control (Johansson 2006). Such sentiments towards celebrities observed by international research are seen in Vietnam society as well, but remain under-researched. This article focuses on Trần Thành, who belongs to a particular group of celebrities – performing artists, to illuminate how entertainers like him become objects of intense public scrutiny and experience the dehumanising effect of fame.

Following Vietnam's transition to a market economy since 1986, public interest in non-political figures (rather than 'national heroes' as in past periods), i.e. celebrities such as sport stars and entertainers, has grown and has been linked to the influence of Western individualism and the rise of a consumer culture (Thomas and Heng 2001). Historically, society looked down on art performers, regarding their profession as valueless and not belonging to any established professional groups or respectable social community (Schafer 2010). The pejorative term *xương ca vô loại* ('worthless singers'), which originally refers to singers and theatrical actors (Schafer 2010), has extended to performing artists of all genres. Today, societal prejudice against entertainers has waned to some extent, and those who showcase their skills in artistic endeavours may earn public respect. That said, societal judgement of entertainers' behaviours can be harsh, because they are deemed 'personalities of the public' (*người của công chúng*). Furthermore, since entertainers keep appearing on screens and the news, there are expectations that they serve as moral examples, especially for young people. An entertainer's bad image is often seen as a matter worthy of public concern. Entertainers are expected to constantly watch their speech and manners.

Although many artists earn their fame through genuine talent, their success can be at times downplayed by a societal emphasis on luck, locally represented as the blessing of *Tổ nghề* (The Gods of the performing arts), i.e. those who established and promoted the performing profession. Many artists even attribute their success to the blessing of *Tổ nghề* (*Tổ nghề thương*) to demonstrate a sense of modesty, acknowledging the role of good fortune in their professional advancements. Besides the blessing of *Tổ nghề*, artists are also expected to show gratitude towards the public, because they 'owe' their success to audiences' support. Successful entertainers like Trần Thành can therefore face harsh criticisms for a perceived lack of humility as this article will illuminate.

Gender essentialism in Vietnam

Confucianism has historically played a significant role in Vietnamese culture, similar to Chinese and Korean societies (Kim and Kim 2019, Xu *et al.* 2022, Gammon 2023). Under Confucian influence, Vietnamese society has traditionally embraced patriarchal notions of gender roles. Men are expected to carry forward the family lineage and serve as the financial backbone (Soucy 1999, Rydstrom and Drummond 2004); they are expected to act as providers and decision-makers and demonstrate self-reliance and leadership (Tran 2004). Women, by contrast, are assumed to primarily take on caregiving roles (Luong

2003, Phan 2022, 2023) and act as upholders of morality (Nguyen and Harris 2009). Masculinity, like femininity, is associated with heterosexuality, as all men are expected to marry and have children (Horton and Rydstrom 2011, La 2012). Vietnamese hegemonic masculinity generally adheres to the principles of hegemonic masculinity as developed by Connell (2005/1995), which emphasise the dominance of heterosexual manhood over other forms of masculinities and femininities (Gammon 2024). While hegemonic masculinity changes over time, it has historically been connected to the roles of heterosexual men as breadwinners and leaders, bolstering the legitimacy of patriarchy (Connell 2005).

Today, while traditional views persist, various factors such as communism, modernisation, and globalisation, have converged to shape gender relations in Vietnam (Martin 2018, Schuler *et al.* 2006). Since the 1990s, Vietnam has experienced rapid economic growth and exposure to Western cultural products have introduced ideas of sexual freedom and more individualist lifestyles (Gammon and Phan 2024b, Nguyen 2007, Martin 2018). This influence of global media, combined with the Communist party's support for gender equality in political and social participation, has led to changes in gender perspectives and an improvement in the status of women (Gammon and Phan 2024b, Nguyen 2007, Martin 2018). Additionally, the government's more relaxed approach to gender discussions has allowed for the robustness of the LGBTQ+ movement and the popularity of queer media since the 2010s (Gammon 2023, Gammon, Phan and Le 2025). Despite such progress, pressure on men to perform 'tough masculinity' and homophobia persist (Horton 2014). Due to traditional expectations, men are discouraged from expressing vulnerable emotions (La 2012, Vu 2021). Since childhood, men, labelled as *phái mạnh* (the stronger sex), are usually taught to be active and *trọng* so that they can lead and protect women, who are seen as the weaker sex (*phái yếu*) (Nguyen and Harris 2009, Schafer 2010, Nguyen 2012).

Methodology

To examine online discussions of Trần Thành's vulnerable moment, we chose critical discourse analysis (e.g. Kanjere 2019, Tolton 2014, Wood and Kroger 2000) for a 'close reading of the nuances of language in targeted materials that communicate certain messages about a specific topic' (Timke 2023, p. 710). Traditionally used for analysis of news articles and now extended to Internet forums, this method reveals discursive tendencies found in social discussions (Tolton 2014). It identifies broader units of meaning (topics) by summing up sections of text and subsequently scrutinises smaller units such as discursive strategies and linguistic structures to unfold the subtleties within the data (Tolton 2014, van Dijk 1991). Facebook, the most popular social platform in Vietnam with about 66 million Vietnamese users, is the subject of this case study. We chose viral posts from impactful Facebook pages with thousands to millions of followers, including official pages of mainstream news outlets and user-generated pages. These posts, published in March following the press meeting for the movie project 'Glorious Fame' on 21 March 2023, all garnered over 1,000 reactions.

To search for relevant posts on Facebook, both authors used keywords such as *Trần Thành*, *Trần Thành khóc*, *Trần Thành hào quang rực rỡ*, *Hào quang rực rỡ*, and a combination of #haoquangrucro and #tranthanh, resulting in 25 suitable posts. We do not claim that our searches are exhaustive because from observations, Facebook does not

present all the results but provides results depending on its algorithmic filtering based on individuals' prior behaviours; in fact, our individual searches led to different results: the first author found more results than the second. Nevertheless, our selection has representative value, being impactful posts with at least 1,000 reactions (including three with nearly 10,000 reactions and five with over 10,000); 14 posts contain more than 1,000 comments and 9 contain more than 100 comments. From the selected posts, we examined the textual (captions or articles attached) and visual themes (images or videos attached) of the posts and the salient patterns of the comments. The authors compared our analysis to one another to see if we interpreted the content of the post and accompanying comments similarly and discussed the salient themes and patterns of such content.

We based our research on the framing theory, which has been traditionally used in scholarships on political and social movements (Goffman 1974, Entman 1993) and has become useful to social media research (Phadke and Mitra 2020, Knüpfer and Entman 2018, Mitra 2020). As Entman (1993, p. 52) explains, framing typically involves selection and salience: 'To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described'. Entman (1993) contends that a single sentence may manifest more than one of the mentioned four framing functions, but a framing text may not involve all those four functions.

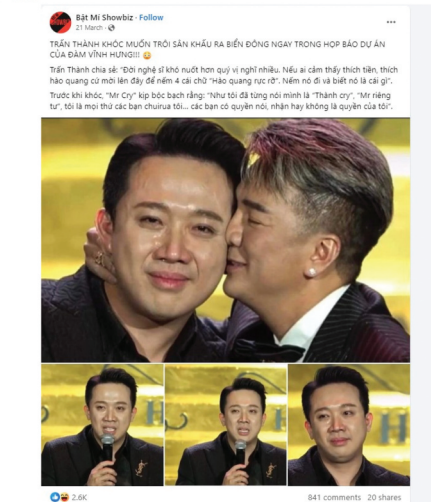
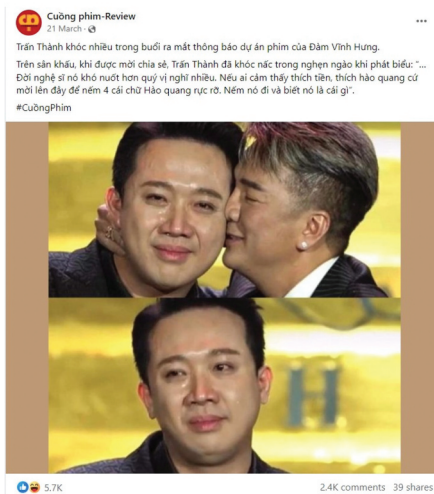
The function we focus on here is moral judgement, which many of the Facebook posts demonstrate. Most highlight only one imbroglio: Trần Thành cried during the promotion of someone else's project. Following Entman's (1993) diagnosis, we argue that the posts make Trần Thành's crying salient by putting it on the spotlight and even use his crying face as a spectacle for discussion, making it noticeable and memorable to audiences. Our analysis will show how their framing strategies have triggered negative reactions to Trần Thành's moment of vulnerability. Those social media posts serve as outlets for the collective shaming and cyberbullying of the actor, demonstrated in the comments. To respect media users' privacy, we do not reveal account names and only present the selected comments and their sources (the posts below which the comments were made).

Findings

In this section, we start by delineating the impactful posts and the way they steer public reactions through use of images and texts (see examples in **Figure 1**) before moving to the comment sections of these posts, unveiling the dominant discursive strategies used to shame Trần Thành as a man and performing artist.

Impactful posts

Out of the 25 posts selected, 11 are unfavourably leading (meant to trigger audiences' negative reactions), 13 appear neutral with no direct comments but emphasise his vulnerability as they draw attention to his crying and the statement, 'being an artist is difficult', and only one offers a defence of his vulnerability. In all posts, the 'like' and 'haha' (laugh) reactions dominate; likes are the most common (22 posts), while 'haha' reactions



Examples of the visual themes of posts: Trần Thành's crying face as spectacle.

are the most used in the rest. While a 'like' expresses an interest without a clear indication of attitude, 'haha' signals a non-serious attitude and suggests either amusement (the user finds the post funny) or a sarcastic attitude (the user finds the subject being discussed ridiculous or the person being discussed laughable). In terms of visual themes, 17 posts use images of Trần Thành crying at the event while the rest feature videos of his speech which includes his moment of vulnerability. In other words, they make a spectacle of Trần Thành's crying face.

Among the 11 apparently leading posts, 6 do not make direct comments but use the unfavourable opinions of other artists or non-identifiable subjects such as 'netizens', 'audiences' regarding Trần Thành's moment of vulnerability and his lament to indicate that his behaviour was inappropriate, thus delegitimising his statement and masking their framing attempt. Examples include, 'netizens don't

understand why Trần Thành has to cry' (Zingnews.vn, March-23), 'many netizens frown upon the artist's frequent crying' (Kenh14.vn, March-22), 'Many people say Trần Thành doesn't know how to control his emotions and his crying is out of place' (Vietgiaitri.com, March-28), 'Many Vbiz entertainers express disapproval of Trần Thành' (Vietgiaitri.com, March-28), 'Some audience members aren't happy that Trần Thành cries at another entertainer's event' (article attached to a post on Tuổi Trẻ, March-22).

Three posts both make a direct comment and use others' comments. Báo điện tử VTC News's post on March 23 states: 'Trần Thành can cry but he shouldn't become inappropriate' while citing public opinions that 'the actor can't control his emotions'. It even offers Trần Thành advice: 'Trần Thành needs to be more sensible, he shouldn't let his emotions overwhelm and let his genuine tears become inappropriate'. Bí Mật VBIZ's post (March 24) is even harsher: it cites Trác Thúy Miêu (a female TV host)'s comment, 'When your one night performance equals people's many years of work, don't cry like a victim', and makes a direct comment, 'Ms Miêu is spot on! [He] made efforts to become famous, no one forced him to [enter showbiz] so [he] can't cry about it'. Webtretho's post (March 23) similarly argues, 'No one forced Trần Thành to be an entertainer, and he keeps making money from shows, why does he cry and whine about it?'. To further counter Trần Thành's statement, this post also cites other successful entertainers' statements (made in other contexts) indicating that entertainers should silently put up with the price of being famous.

Another post from VTC News (March 24) does not cite anyone, but remarks: 'Trần Thành complains being an artist is difficult, but what job is easy?', 'In this modern day, every job is stressful and challenging'. One post from Chửi Thuê, a trolling page, does not make comments or cite anyone, but uses the laughing emoticon '==))' after its caption: 'Trần Thành cries all his tears as he listens to Đàm Vĩnh Hưng talking about his new project ==))'. The post may seem neutral, but its use of '==))' is leading, indicating that the situation is laughable and that the person being discussed is ridiculous or inappropriate.

Thirteen posts appear neutral with no direct comments but highlight Trần Thành's vulnerability as they draw attention to his crying and statement. They report that Trần Thành *khóc nước mắt* (sobs) (Hóng hớt Showbiz, March-22; Tiin.vn, March-21; Idol Live, March-22; Yan News, March-22), *khóc nghẹn* (chokes his voice while crying) (Hóng hớt Showbiz Video, March-21; Yan News, March-22; Ổ phim, March-21), *khóc ngất* (cries his heart out) (Pops TV Vietnam, March-22), *khóc nhiều* (cries a lot) (Cuồng phim-Review, March-21), *bật khóc* (bursts into tears) (Vietnam's Next Top Model, March-22; Báo Thanh Niên, March-21), *khóc hết nước mắt* (cries all his tears) (Hội những người thích đọc tin tức 24 h, March-22). Ngoisao.net (March-22) emphasises his crying: 'Thành cry' cries again! What makes Trần Thành sob?'. Bật mí showbiz (March-21) calls Trần Thành 'Mr Cry' and describes: 'Trần Thành cries so much that he can sweep the stage into the East Sea'.

We found only one post in favour of Trần Thành on Bí Mật Showbiz (March-24), which cites Việt Anh, a senior actor, as saying, 'his crying contains a sense of empathy, a way to share emotions'; 'he allows himself to express his emotions', 'it's a way to relieve stress', 'it [his crying] is beautiful'. While the post is meant to defend Trần Thành, it does not lead to positive reactions towards the actor, but instead still becomes a platform for aggressive comments, including both those criticising Trần Thành and Việt Anh. Comments targeting Việt Anh describe him as 'senile' and even suggest that Việt Anh tried to 'flatter' (*nịnh*) Trần Thành in the hope of being cast in Trần Thành's future projects.

To sum up, except for the one post defending Trần Thành, all posts, including those appearing neutral, aid the policing of his behaviours and drive unfavourable reactions by drawing attention to his vulnerability.

Salient themes of comments

Our analysis of the comments reveals the following dominant themes: criticisms of Trần Thành's vulnerability; gendered shaming; views of Trần Thành's crying as an act; condemnation of his privilege, including his wealth and consumption habits; and critique of his demand for privacy. It is worth noting that popular comments, usually 'funny' ones, can attract hundreds to thousands of reactions and multiple replies. Among comments disparaging Trần Thành's vulnerability, a dominant discursive strategy is the labelling of Trần Thành by aliases such as *Lệ tổ* (God of tears) and *Thành cry*, which stress that Trần Thành is always crying. The popularity of such aliases has reached the point that Trần Thành jokingly introduced himself as 'Thành cry' in some television shows to acknowledge his emotional character and show anti-fans that he was not ashamed of himself. Here are some examples:

God of tears (*Lệ tổ*) (commented below the posts on Idol Live, March-22 and *Bật mí Showbiz*, March-21)

There's a reason he's called 'Thành cry' (*Cuồng phim-Review*, March-21)

The prince of tears (*Hội những người thích đọc tin tức* 24 h, March-22)

He's also known as I cry whenever I want (*Hội những người thích đọc tin tức* 24 h, March-22)

Unblocked tear ducts – Trần Thành the God of tears (*Tuyển lệ không phanh – Trần Thành Lệ tổ*) (*Bí mật Vbiz*, March-24)

Many comments also use words and phrases indicating high frequency and over-emphasis. Words like *lại* (again), *miết* (always), *suốt ngày* (all day) to indicate repetition and frequency, and *nức nở*, *đắm nước mắt*, *khóc ngất* (cry his eyes out, cry excessively) are employed to overstate the crying. These rhetorics assume that Trần Thành's sobbing is 'too' frequent and indicate the public's fatigue with images of his crying face all over the news(feeds). Both the labelling and overemphasis on Trần Thành's vulnerability signal policing attempts to judge his emotional management (Hochschild 2003/1983). The following comments evince this point:

10 times I look at my phone, 10 times I see him crying. (*Kenh14*, March-22)

Always crying. (Kenh 14, March-22)

Crying again? (YAN News, March-22)

It's tiring to see 'Thành cry'. (Man TV, March-23)

He should learn to control his emotions. (Ngoisao.net, March-22).

He takes every possible chance to cry. (Cuồng phim-Review, March-21)

I don't hate Trần Thành, but he's whiny. I hate that. (Kenh14, March-22)

He cried excessively as if he were forced to do this job. (Ngoisao.net, March-22)

Gendered shaming is another salient theme. Many labelled Trần Thành's crying as 'weak' (*yếu đuối*), 'fragile' (*mong manh*), 'like a woman' (*như đàn bà*), even 'less than a woman' (*không bằng đàn bà*), which either raises questions about his gender as a heterosexual man or presume that he is gay. These homophobic comments persist despite the fact that Trần Thành has only publicly dated women and is married to a female entertainer. According to the Vietnamese gendered norms, a heterosexual man does not/should not cry *that much* and *often*. Below are examples of comments following this pattern.

Queen of tears. (*Chị lệ tở*) (ManTV, March-23)

She-man. (*Thằng đàn bà*) (ManTV, March-23)

His face looks like that of a woman. (ManTV, March-23)

Mrs. Thành (*bà Thành*) (ManTV, March-23)

Men only shed tears over important things, but 'Thành cry' cries about anything. (Cuồng phim-Review, March-21)

A man should be strong. Tough, stony, stubborn, brave. This guy cries all the time ... He doesn't deserve being a man. (Cuồng phim-Review, March-21)

He always says he wants privacy, but in front of the public, he cries like a woman. (Cuồng phim-Review, March-21)

He shows his true gender so no one has to gossip about it. (Cuồng phim-Review, March-21)

The woman kind (*Loại đàn bà*). (Bật mí Showbiz, March-21)

Girl crying (*Bánh bèo khóc nhè*). (Hội những người thích đọc tin tức 24 h, March-22)

A woman's tears and crocodile tears both come from one person. (Hội những người thích đọc tin tức 24 h, March-22)

The most fragile man in the Viet showbiz. (Hội những người thích đọc tin tức 24 h, March-22)

Whenever I see him in a piece of news, he's crying, even more than a woman. (Kenh14, March-22)

This man is even less (strong) than a woman, he jumps at any chance to cry hard as if his parents died. (Bí mật Vbiz, March-24)

Sister Thành (*Chị Thành*). (PopsTV Vietnam, March-22)

He's a man but he cries like a child. (Saigon TV, March-22)

Overtly gay (*Bóng lộ liễu*). (Saigon TV, March-22)

He's a woman in a man's body. That's why he loves crying. (YAN News, March-22)

Another notable theme is the emphasis on Trần Thành's lack of modesty. In myriads of comments, *Tổ nghề* (The God of the performing arts) is used as a discursive strategy to imply that Trần Thành's fame and achievements are 'simply the effect of blind good luck' (Turner 2004, p. 6). While the discourse within media representation of celebrities in Western countries also shows the 'they just got lucky' bias (Turner 2004), the Vietnamese discourse view the luck as coming from a mythical spirit, *Tổ nghề*, which instils a mysterious charm and makes the luck a given. Some comments also carry a warning that Trần Thành may 'run out of his luck' endowed by *Tổ nghề* (*không được Tổ độ*) because of his laments about the price it takes to be a high-profile entertainer. To these commenters, since Trần Thành seems ungrateful for what he is 'given', he deserves the Vietnamese traditional prejudice against performing artists: '*xướng ca vô loại*' (worthless performers).

Watch your mouth or *Tổ nghề* will take back what they've given you. When you still have it, you should appreciate it, otherwise when your time ends, they won't pay a penny to see you act. (Idol Live, March-22)

You're performers, *Tổ nghề* give you a lot but you have to know what's enough to pay it forward. Don't ask for too much. (Idol Live, March-22)

This kind of performer affirms what our ancestors say, 'performers are worthless'. (Idol Live, March-22)

Tổ nghề must really favour you to give you the luxury to work in this profession, and now you cry and cry as if you were suffering. (Bí mật Vbiz, March-24)

Our ancestors used to say 'performers are worthless'. (Bí mật Vbiz, March-24)

He talks as if audiences owe him. (Saigon TV, March-22)

Another pervasive theme is the accusation that Trần Thành fabricates his emotion to seek visibility and attention. Some commenters describe Trần Thành's sobbing as 'an act'. They argue that since he is an actor, life is his stage and his stage is his life. His lament and tears are evaluated by many as 'fake' (*xạo*), 'inauthentic' (*diễn*), 'deceptive' and 'fraudulent' (*giả trân, giả tạo*), and 'crocodile tears' (*nước mắt cá sấu*). These sarcastic comments equalise his emotional display to a method of making money. Some even consider Trần Thành's vulnerability 'laughable' (*hài*), which sarcastically contrasts the content of Trần Thành's speech and his crying. Since Trần Thành rose to fame thanks to his roles in comedic plays and TV shows, the public strategically use his professional background to mock his tears. Below are some instances of such comments.

If Vietnam ran the Oscars, Thành would definitely win one. (ManTV, March-23)

Trần Thành is an actor, he's in the character everywhere. (Bí mật Vbiz, March-24)

He fakes it all the time. (Kenh14, March-22)

Crocodile tears. (Hội những người thích đọc tin tức 24 h, March-22)

He cries with techniques. (Hóng hớt Showbiz, March-22)

He pretends to cry to receive mercy. (YAN News, March-22)

This must be one of his comedy gigs. His stage is everywhere. (Cuồng phim-Review, March-21)

He makes money out of crying. (Bí mật Vbiz, March-24)

That's a real comedian, his crying makes so many people laugh. (Saigon TV, March-22)

Crying is his branding. (Ngoisao.net, March-22)

Many other comments reveal that the lack of empathy for Trần Thành comes from an awareness of the financial compensation of his fame. According to them, compared with most people, especially those holding 'high-risk occupations', Trần Thành has it all: fame, admiration, money, status. His lament about the backstage hardship of his job is, therefore, seen as ridiculous because of the immense gap between his income and that of the majority of Vietnamese people. Some examples include:

Who lives a life like Trần Thành, rich, nice cars, luxury fashion, properties worth billions of Vietnam dong, he eats too much and gets fat. He must be suffering a lot. (Ngoisao.net, March-22)

Some people earn only 2 million dong per month. You make hundreds of millions per night. Why act like that? (Saigon TV, March-22)

He's crying because he hasn't had many show bookings lately! He hasn't bought new watches worth several billions each. (YAN News, March-22)

Is it hard for you to enjoy having money, assets, and luxury clothes? (Hóng hớt Showbiz, March-22)

If suffering means possessing Hublot and BMW, I wouldn't mind. (Idol Live, March-22)

You have luxurious cars, executive apartments and villas, and travel internationally ... crying about what? (. . .) If that job is too much for you, you should quit. (Idol Live, 22 March)

The last dominant theme among comments involves privacy, making use of a 'taste your own medicine' discursive strategy. As presented in the Introduction, not long before this promotion event, Trần Thành was criticised for renting a whole cinema screening room for himself and friends in a cineplex in Ho Chi Minh City to enjoy privacy. Comments following this pattern thus often use rhetorical questions to focus on the contradiction between privacy and publicity, and between self-indulgence and hard labour to censure Trần Thành's divulging the unknowns behind the stage.

Why don't you rent a whole cinema room to cry in private? (Hóng hớt Showbiz, March-22)

Why are you crying in front of a crowd, shouldn't you be crying in privacy? (Hóng hớt Showbiz, March-22)

[I] thought you needed privacy? (Idol Live, March-22)

[He] wants privacy but cries in public. (Idol Live, March-22)

You should cry in privacy, while letting the whole world see you cry? (Bật mí Showbiz, March-21)

It is worth noting that there are comments defending Trần Thành, indicating that he simply had a moment of vulnerability like any ordinary person. These comments tend to critique other Facebook users for being unfairly 'harsh' on Trần Thành or label the gendered shaming and body shaming comments 'intrusive' and 'toxic'. There are also 'neutral' comments in which people do not advocate for the backlash against Trần Thành, but they share that Trần Thành's crying has become a normality that is hardly news and drives them to boredom. These protective and neutral comments, nonetheless, are overwhelmingly outnumbered by the ruthless criticisms identified above.

Discussion and concluding remarks

Public backlash against Trần Thành reveals a long-rooted social prejudice which looks down on entertainers as performing clowns (*con hát, bọn diễn viên/ca sĩ*). Although Trần Thành has established success in various roles in the local showbiz, according to the public, his celebrity is not purely the outcome of his hard work and talent. He owes his success to *Tổ nghề* and audiences. In other words, his celebrity is seen as given rather than something built over time through continuous efforts. The public see themselves as a large part of the equation that drives Trần Thành's success and therefore question, 'What is he whining and crying about?'. While many acknowledge Trần Thành's achievements, they felt betrayed and found it unfair, seeing somebody who seemed to have it all cried for having it all. In this sense, the idea of the privileged complaining about his privilege is unacceptable. The rage towards Trần Thành demonstrates how celebrities set trends for the public to follow while, at the same time, working at the mercy of the public. As audiences are well aware of their star-making power (Gamson 2011), they want the stars to behave in ways that conform to their expectations; in this case, exhibiting modesty and restraining the display of vulnerability. Concurrently, audiences cling to the idea of a celebrity as a means to construct a dissimilarity between Trần Thành and 'them' (ordinary norm-conforming people), thus denying his right to emotional display, laments, and privacy.

While Trần Thành's behaviour may seem trivial, he has transgressed both norms and social expectations of entertainers. In openly expressing his bitter feelings and sobbing, Trần Thành is seen as failing at emotional management despite the social expectation that individuals should keep negative feelings such as dissatisfaction and resentment to themselves (Hochschild 2003/1983). Such an expectation for emotional management is even higher for famous people, because enduring hate content, a form of emotional labour, is regarded as part of their job in exchange for the high income and associated privileges, as similarly observed in other cultures (e.g. Lee and Abidin 2024 in Korea; Mitra 2020 in India). As a man, Trần Thành is also expected to hide vulnerable emotions. The gendered shaming comments reveal an essentialist binary gender view which assumes a clear distinction between men and women and dictates their behaviours. Since Trần Thành deviated from gender norms, he was called '*thằng đàn bà*' (the she-man), an offensive label indicating that a man is not manly enough and that he possesses

undesirable personality traits of a woman. Looking at audience reactions as public discourses rather than a collection of individual responses, we argue that the public backlash against Trần Thành is itself an artefact of celebrity culture, attesting to the commercial value and popularity of his image and showing how seriously the public took him as a key opinion leader and how his viewpoints and statements were worth discussing. Again, Trần Thành elicited high interest from the media and public, be it positive or negative. Moreover, 'judging a celebrity's real worth' (Marcus 2020, p. 193) has become a way in which the social media users exercise their freedom of speech and also 'freedom to hate' (Lim 2017, p. 411). Our analysis unravels how the comments manifest netizens' engagement in a participatory culture that perpetuates the humiliation and objectification of Trần Thành, echoing the traditional narrative of artists as less worthy and subject to public judgement.

This case study demonstrates how media reports on social networks dictate which aspects of a celebrity's life and behaviours the public 'should' be concerned with. They also serve as the mechanisms organising and driving high traffic of engagement. Entertainers such as Trần Thành, who make money out of their personas, also bear the risk of being seen as inauthentic. His crying has been criticised as overreacting, over-performing, overdramatic, or even hypocritical, and has often been questioned for its emotional authenticity by journalists and audiences. As much as the public desire to find out what famous entertainers are 'truly' like, manifested in the popularity of reality programmes and media coverage of celebrities' private lives (Turner 2004, Aslama and Pantti 2006, Gamson 2011), they do not want to feel like they have been emotionally exploited and deceived by entertainers (Merton 1946, Horton and Wohl 1956) and, therefore, may become sceptical of famous people's emotional moments. Audiences, to a certain extent, reserve this right to be doubtful about Trần Thành's emotional authenticity because his celebrity persona is 'a site of tension and ambiguity in which an active audience has the space to make meaning of their world by accepting or rejecting the social values embodied by a celebrity image' (Meyers 2009, p. 891). In this specific case, Trần Thành's statement about the glorious fame and its cost to an artist's life and his teary image evoked the rejection of the social values that have been long associated with celebrity in Vietnam – economic wealth and social privileges. While it has been argued in the literature that media coverage of the details of a star's private life reveals them 'as a regular person' rather than 'a highly constructed figure' on screen or stage (Meyers 2009, p. 892), segments of Trần Thành's off-stage personal life like hanging out with his entourage only add to his 'constructed figure' in the public's eyes, rather than bringing him closer to the public as a regular person.

We also argue that Facebook as a discursive space is both a space of celebrity consumption and production (Gamson 2011) in which the public both consume unfavourable reports about celebrities like Trần Thành and further produce negative content through comments and the use of emoticons. The mechanism of this dual process is that Facebook pages impose underlying frames that motivate media users to respond. These comments subsequently attract reactions to themselves: other media users may want to respond to both the content of the Facebook posts and the comments below them, either by further commenting or choosing a Facebook reaction emoticon. This way, the consumption and production of hate content and online shaming persist. We further propose that the scrutiny and rich veins of sarcastic, patronising and offensive comments on Trần Thành enables a cycle of

consuming and producing celebrity. Observing this vicious circle, we may consider how the media and the public have a say about who a person is and what identity this person holds at the mundane level of everyday life. We argue that the production of hate and online shaming is a social process whereby media users do not only consume hate content produced by other users, but also actively contribute to the production of such content for others to consume. Their comments serve both as ‘a punishment tool in contemporary society’ (Muir *et al.* 2021, p. 1) and as a self-empowering strategy to gain approval from others since shaming is condoned and encouraged. In that sense, netizens construct the discursive space, give it meanings, and manipulate it. The hate content and online shaming of Trần Thành on Facebook pages is a discursive space, an object of consumption, a subject of production and even a commercial commodity driving media traffic by eliciting clicks and comments from users. The fame that Trần Thành has earned makes him simultaneously an object of ‘admiration and desire’ and one of ‘derision, ridicule, and resentment’ (Turner 2004, p. 48). As his private life is constantly commodified as newsworthy (Marshall 2021), he suffers from the dehumanising effects of fame.

In the emerging extant literature, online shaming targeting celebrities has been reported in various contexts, such as body-shaming and slut-shaming of female Bollywood actresses (Mitra 2020), online bashing of Finnish reality television stars (Ouvrein *et al.* 2019), appearance-shaming on TikTok by Belgian youth (Ouvrein 2023), misogynistic shaming of female YouTube fashion influencers in South Korea (Lee and Abidin 2024) or a nationalistic movement initiated by netizens to cancel an actor in China (Hu and Wang 2024). Joining this nascent, ongoing scholarly discussion, our study illustrates how, in Vietnam, the hate content and online shaming of a famous person contributes to the representations of celebrity in popular culture and the whole celebrity industry in which the public and online journalism pursue particular agendas. This article has looked into the case of Trần Thành – a high-profile Vietnamese performing artist and the recent backlash against his act of sobbing and lamenting about the hardship of being a famous entertainer. It reveals the framing strategies impactful Facebook pages used to trigger negative reactions from audiences and the discursive strategies users deployed to ridicule and shame the actor. This study illustrates how social media become outlets for the practices of trolling, hate, and cyberbullying, manifested in public comments below these posts. While we focus on one case study of Trần Thành, we want to stress that the hate and shaming he has suffered from is not uncommon. Many other celebrities, such as Sơn Tùng M-TP, Hoàng Thùy Linh, Miss World Vietnam 2023 Huỳnh Trần Ý Nhi, have suffered intense criticism. In light of the serious lack of research on hate and online shaming in the Vietnamese context, this study lays a stepping stone for further studies regarding this ever-evolving phenomenon.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

There is no funding involved.

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