



Power, Face, and Public Humiliation in Mass Communication: The Case of the “Tổng Tài” Incident in Hanoi (September 2025)

Phan Van Kien*, Vu Mai Anh**

Abstract: This article analyzes the dynamics of mass communication surrounding the incident widely referred to in public opinion as the “Tổng Tài” case (a colloquial term used in Vietnamese online discourse to refer to a wealthy, powerful “CEO-like” figure, often with connotations of status display and authority), which occurred in Hanoi in September 2025. It does so from the perspectives of power, face, and public humiliation in the context of digital media. Adopting a qualitative research approach with a case study design, the study employs discourse analysis and content analysis to examine data from mainstream news media and social media platforms, focusing on the processes through which moral judgments of public opinion are formed, disseminated, and legitimized. The findings indicate that the initial conflict originated from a clash between positional power and legitimate power within an everyday interaction, leading to the collapse of an individual’s face once violent behavior was exposed in the online public sphere. Journalism and social media played a pivotal role in amplifying, legitimizing, and enacting public humiliation as an informal mechanism of social punishment. On this basis, the article proposes a “Power – Loss of Face – Public Humiliation” model to explain the dynamics of mass communication in Vietnam’s digital society. The study contributes an interdisciplinary analytical framework to communication research while also raising critical issues concerning media ethics, public opinion governance, and the limits of popular justice in the contemporary media environment.

Keywords: mass communication; power; public humiliation; public opinion; Vietnamese social media.

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1. Introduction

The rapid development of digital media and social networking platforms has

profoundly transformed the formation, circulation, and control of public opinion. In the digital environment, discursive power is no longer concentrated solely in institutions such as the press or the state, but is increasingly dispersed through public participation. Social media users have

* University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi; email: kienpv@vnu.edu.vn

** University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi

become active agents in producing, evaluating, and judging social events, thereby generating collective waves of public opinion capable of influencing individuals, organizations, and even legal processes. In this context, phenomena such as “trial by media,” the “court of public opinion,” and “public shaming” have emerged as informal mechanisms of social control.

The incident widely referred to as the “Tông tài” case—in which an individual allegedly ordered the assault of a café employee in Hanoi in September 2025—provides a representative example of these dynamics in Vietnam’s digital society. What began as a localized interpersonal conflict quickly spread across social media, generating widespread outrage, mockery, and moral condemnation. Information circulation extended beyond reporting the violent act itself to include the exposure of personal details, the production of mocking memes, and calls for social punishment. As a result, the symbolic image of power initially associated with the central figure was rapidly reconstructed into one of public humiliation.

Theoretical perspectives on power, face, and public humiliation provide important insights into this phenomenon. From Foucault’s perspective (1977), power is not fixed but operates through shifting networks of relations and resistance. In digital societies, social media platforms have become spaces of “counter-power,” enabling the public to challenge or reverse traditional forms of authority (Castells 2007). At the same time, Goffman’s (1967) concept of face highlights how social conflicts are closely tied to the protection or collapse of social image, especially in media environments where public judgment is continuously amplified. Public humiliation, analyzed by Ronson (2015) and Braithwaite

(1989) as a form of social punishment grounded in shame and public pressure, becomes particularly significant in cultural contexts that place strong emphasis on honor and face, such as Vietnam.

Despite growing research on fake news, media crises, and online violence in Vietnam, relatively little attention has been paid to public shaming as a power–moral mechanism of mass communication. Against this backdrop, this article analyzes the “Tông tài” case through an interdisciplinary framework integrating theories of power, face, and public humiliation. By examining how online public opinion reconfigures power relations and enacts social punishment, the study contributes to communication research in Vietnam while raising important questions concerning media governance, journalistic ethics, and the limits of popular justice in the digital age.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Crowd Power

The concept of crowd power originates from classical theories of collective psychology. Le Bon (1895) argued that individuals in crowds tend to lose independent judgment and become driven by contagious emotions. Reicher (2001), however, reconceptualized the crowd as an organized social actor whose behavior reflects negotiated norms and power relations. Foucault (1977) further emphasized that power operates through surveillance and symbolic discipline rather than solely through physical coercion. In digital societies, Castells (2007) introduced the notion of “counter-power,” highlighting how networked communication enables publics to challenge traditional authority structures. Similarly, Papacharissi (2014)

showed that online publics are also “affective publics,” formed through the circulation of emotions and shared sentiments.

In Vietnam, Nguyen Xuan Hong (2025) and Trieu et al. (2024) noted the amplifying role of social media in creating “waves of public opinion” capable of restructuring symbolic power relations. These studies suggest a shift from viewing crowds as irrational masses toward understanding them as dynamic actors embedded in digital power relations. However, the mechanisms through which crowd power becomes moral judgment and social sanction in interaction with journalism remain insufficiently explored.

2.2. Face and Politeness

Goffman’s (1967) theory of face provides an important framework for understanding social conflicts as struggles over social image. Brown and Levinson (1987) extended this perspective by emphasizing face-threatening acts as common sources of communicative tension. In digital contexts, Walsh (2019) and Merunková and Šlerka (2019) demonstrated how online users continuously construct and defend face through self-presentation and impression management. Yoo (2012) further showed that online face is strongly associated with honor and status in East Asian societies.

Vietnamese studies likewise highlight the importance of face and honor in online interactions. Nguyen Thanh Thoang and Mai Thi Thanh Thuy (2018), as well as Le Thi Ngoc Thuong (2023), showed that online insults, mockery, and defamation can seriously damage social image and dignity. Existing research therefore suggests that face in digital environments is increasingly visible, mediated, and vulnerable. Nevertheless, less attention has been paid to

how the collapse of face in public online spaces escalates into collective moral judgment and social sanction.

2.3. Public Humiliation

Braithwaite (1989) conceptualized public shaming as a shame-based mechanism of social control, while Ronson (2015) demonstrated how online shaming can lead to long-term reputational destruction. Aitchison and Meckled-Garcia (2021) further described online public shaming as a form of informal collective punishment that often lacks legal due process. Forestal (2024) emphasized the role of emotional diffusion and network structures in amplifying public humiliation online.

In Vietnam, Ngo et al. (2021) and Mai et al. (2023) highlighted the psychological and educational impacts of online shaming and cyberbullying. Research by Phan Van Kien (2018) and Phan Van Kien et al. (2025) additionally showed that online discussion spaces and Facebook communities actively shape and amplify social judgments toward individuals. Together, these studies indicate that public humiliation in digital environments functions not merely as individual shaming but as a collective mechanism of moral regulation. However, the interaction between emotional dynamics, media framing, and collective punishment remains under-theorized, particularly in the Vietnamese context.

2.4. Communication Crises and Fake News

Research on communication crises, fake news, and cyberbullying highlights how digital media environments intensify emotional amplification and rapid public judgment. Vosoughi et al. (2018) demonstrated that false information spreads faster than factual information, especially when associated with strong emotions, while

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) emphasized the risks of distorted public opinion formation. Studies on cyberbullying similarly show that online violence often involves public defamation, rumor dissemination, and collective mockery (Hinduja and Patchin 2010; Kowalski et al. 2014).

In Vietnam, Vo Trung Hung et al. (2022) analyzed the challenges of detecting fake news in Vietnamese, while Vista.gov.vn (2024) emphasized the need for stronger social media governance. Nguyen Thanh Thoang and Mai Thi Thanh Thuy (2018) and Le Thi Ngoc Thuong (2023) documented practices such as public humiliation, derogatory labeling, and symbolic violence in online environments. These studies demonstrate that fake news, online violence, and communication crises are not isolated technical problems but interconnected social mechanisms that contribute to emotional amplification and collective moral judgment.

Despite this growing body of scholarship, existing research has largely examined crowd behavior, face, public shaming, fake news, and cyberbullying as separate phenomena. The dynamic interaction between social media and journalism in constructing, amplifying, and legitimizing public humiliation remains insufficiently explored in Vietnam. Addressing this gap, the present study proposes an integrated analytical framework linking power, loss of face, and public humiliation in order to better explain mass communication dynamics in contemporary digital society.

3. Research Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative research approach with a case study design to examine the mechanisms through which

mass communication emerges and operates within a specific social event. This design enables an in-depth exploration of the social processes associated with power, face, and public humiliation in the context of digital media, rather than merely describing the phenomenon at a general level. The incident referred to in public opinion as the “*Tổng tài*” case, which occurred in Hanoi in September 2025, was selected as a typical case because it embodies key characteristics of mass communication, including rapid dissemination on social media, the involvement of mainstream journalism, and collective punitive reactions from the public.

Research data were collected from two primary sources: journalistic media and social media. The journalistic dataset consists of 45 news articles published on five major Vietnamese online newspapers, namely *Dan Tri*, *Thanh Nien*, *Tien Phong*, *Lao Dong*, and *Nguoi Lao Dong*. These newspapers were selected due to their high readership, wide national coverage, and recognized roles as influential mainstream media outlets in Vietnam, providing diverse yet representative perspectives on the incident. These articles were selected within the time frame from September 18 to 30, 2025, corresponding to the period from the initial occurrence of the incident to the dissemination of official information by competent authorities. The selection criteria required that the articles (i) contain the keyword “*Tổng tài*” and (ii) directly report on or analyze the incident.

The social media dataset focuses on Facebook, the platform on which the incident was first circulated and most widely amplified. This dataset includes 62 public posts and 320 representative comments. The selection of social media data was based on the following criteria: (i) posts originating from highly visible sources such as public groups or individual accounts with

significant reach and interaction (e.g., high numbers of likes, shares, and comments), and (ii) comments that exhibit salient features of public shaming, including mockery, derogatory labeling, moral condemnation, or calls for social punishment.

All data were collected exclusively from publicly accessible spaces in order to comply with research ethics principles and to avoid infringements of personal privacy.

3.1. Analytical Procedure

To ensure transparency and analytical rigor, the study followed a systematic multi-step analytical procedure combining thematic coding, content analysis, and discourse analysis.

The collected materials, consisting of 45 news articles and 62 Facebook posts with 320 comments, were compiled into a unified dataset. Duplicate and irrelevant materials were removed, and each item was assigned an identification code according to its source. The researchers then conducted multiple close readings of the dataset to identify key actors, narrative structures, and recurring communicative patterns related to power, face-threatening situations, and public humiliation. Based on these readings,

thematic coding was carried out through a combination of open coding and focused coding. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data and subsequently grouped into broader analytical categories aligned with the theoretical framework of power, face, and public humiliation (see Table 1).

Following the coding process, content analysis was used to identify dominant themes and recurring patterns across journalistic and social media data, particularly forms of moral condemnation, emotional amplification, and public shaming. In addition, qualitative discourse analysis was employed to examine how journalism and social media constructed and circulated meanings through narrative structures, lexical choices, and framing strategies. Particular attention was paid to the ways journalism legitimized public opinion, social media enacted public humiliation, and language contributed to the collapse of face and redistribution of symbolic power. Finally, the findings were interpreted through the integrated framework of power, face, and public humiliation in order to develop the “Power – Loss of Face – Public Humiliation” model grounded in empirical evidence.

Table 1: *Thematic coding scheme*

Category	Code	Description	Example (data type)
Power	Positional power	Self-claimed status, authority, wealth display	References to “ <i>Tông tài</i> ”, social status claims (news/social media)
	Legitimate power	Role-based authority	Café staff enforcing rules (news reports)
	Power imposition	Use of coercion or violence	Ordering assault (video/report)
Face	Face-threatening act (FTA)	Situations perceived as insulting or disrespectful	Being reminded in public (news narrative)
	Face protection	Attempts to maintain social image	Justifications, denial (media statements)

Category	Code	Description	Example (data type)
	Face collapse	Loss of social image in public sphere	Apology, expressions of shame (news/social media)
Journalism framing	Emotional amplification	Highlighting outrage, anger	Headlines emphasizing “public anger”
	Personalization	Focus on individual identity/background	Reporting personal details
	Moral framing	Presenting event as moral judgment	“Condemnation”, “outrage” discourse
Public humiliation	Mockery	Use of sarcasm, memes	Derisive use of “Tông tài” (comments)
	Derogatory labeling	Assigning negative identities	Insulting nicknames
	Exposure (doxxing)	Sharing personal information	Calls to reveal identity
	Moral condemnation	Collective judgment of wrongdoing	Calls for punishment
	Punitive calls	Calls for boycott, sanctions	“Fire him”, “boycott business”
Crowd dynamics	Affective amplification	Spread of emotions	Rapid escalation of anger
	Moral alignment	Positioning as “morally right”	Comments reinforcing group stance

3.2. Researcher Reflexivity

This study adopts an interpretive-critical approach, acknowledging that data interpretation is shaped by the researchers’ theoretical perspectives on power, face, and public humiliation. To address this issue, the analysis draws on multiple data sources (journalistic and social media) and is supported by concrete empirical evidence, including representative excerpts from news articles and online comments. In addition, coding and analytical procedures were conducted systematically to ensure transparency and consistency. The study is therefore positioned as a reflexive inquiry that critically examines how mass communication processes interact with cultural norms and power relations in the digital environment.

4. Research Findings

4.1. The Collapse of Face and the Initial Power Conflict

The incident referred to in public opinion as the “Tông Tài” case originated from what appeared to be a minor and routine communicative situation: a café employee reminded a customer about smoking behavior within the service space. From the perspective of face theory (Goffman), however, this was not merely a professional reminder but was interpreted by the central figure as a serious face-threatening act (FTA). According to the account of the individual involved, as reported by the press, the reminder was perceived as “insulting,” particularly because it occurred in the presence of acquaintances, thereby damaging the social image that the individual sought to maintain.

“According to Mr. T., the incident occurred on the afternoon of September 17.

At that time, he and a group of friends went to a café in the Times City urban area. While inside, Mr. T. took out a tobacco pipe that had just been given to him, but it was clogged. He therefore insisted that he had not smoked in the café. However, his group was reminded by a staff member. According to Mr. T., the staff member initially spoke very softly, but later used language that he considered offensive toward him and his friends. As a result, Mr. T. asked ‘a younger associate’ to go to the cashier area to inquire. He stated that upon entering the area, the staff member ‘stared aggressively and clenched his fists,’ leading his associate to believe he was being attacked and to ‘react in self-defense’ by slapping the staff member.” (Dan Tri 2025)

“Regarding the pointing gesture shown in the viral clip, Mr. T. stated that it was not a signal for his companion to assault the employee. He explained that he was holding a pipe-cleaning brush, and since keeping it down might dirty his clothes, he raised his hand. ‘When I saw the scuffle, I also raised the brush and shouted for them to stop and not fight anymore. I feel deeply wronged,’ Mr. T. said in his account.” (Tien Phong 2025)

In a cultural context such as Vietnam’s, where face and social position are highly valued—especially among individuals who self-identify as holding elevated social status—this perceived “loss of face” became a direct catalyst for conflict.

From a power perspective, the incident reveals a collision between two distinct forms of power. On the one hand, there was legitimate power associated with the café employee’s occupational role, manifested through the enforcement of service-space regulations. On the other hand, there was positional or symbolic power, self-constructed by the “*Tổng tài*” figure through the use of honorific labels, displays of

wealth, and claims to social connections. When legitimate power was not acknowledged, positional power was mobilized as an instrument of imposition, culminating in the act of ordering companions to assault the café employee.

This action reflects an attempt to restore face not through dialogue or socially oriented face-work strategies, but through coercive power, thereby transforming a communicative conflict into a violent one. Notably, it was precisely this use of violence to “reclaim face” that became the immediate cause of a much larger-scale collapse of face. Once the security camera footage was disseminated on social media, the image of power that the central figure sought to assert was rapidly reversed. From a position of authority within the café space, the individual was transformed into an object of surveillance, judgment, and condemnation by online communities. This process illustrates the fragility of face in the digital media era, where control over personal image no longer rests solely with the individual.

The initial power conflict thus did not remain confined to an interaction between two individuals in a physical setting but quickly expanded into a confrontation between individual power and the counter-power of public opinion. Online comments, memes, and calls for boycotts contributed to the deconstruction of the “*Tổng tài*” image, recasting it as a symbol of the abuse of power, arrogance, and a lack of cultural competence in social conduct. In this process, face was not merely damaged but almost entirely destroyed, ultimately compelling the central figure to issue a public apology as a belated attempt to salvage their social image.

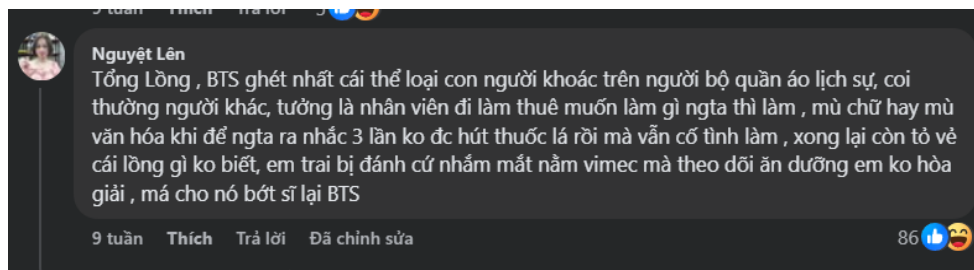


Figure 1: Comment on Facebook: “Really hates this kind of person—someone who dresses politely but looks down on others, thinking that just because employees are hired workers, they can be treated however one wants; someone who even curses and behaves uncultured when reminded three times not to smoke, yet still deliberately does it. Then afterward, he pretends not to know anything. The younger guy getting hit is just being used to gain views. If it were me, I wouldn’t reconcile—I’d expose him again”

In sum, the collapse of face in this case was not an accidental outcome but the result of a chain of power conflicts triggered by a misinterpretation of an everyday communicative situation. Mass communication played a crucial role in amplifying and reversing the balance of power, transforming an act intended to assert personal face into the very cause of its destruction at the societal level.

4.2. Journalism and the Legitimation of Public Opinion

After the video recording the incident spread widely on social media, mainstream journalism quickly entered the scene and became a significant actor in the process of shaping public opinion. In the initial phase, many news organizations approached the case by drawing on social media as the primary source of information, using descriptive headlines such as “Clip of ‘Tổng tài’ ordering the assault of a café employee goes viral” or “Police verify altercation at a café in Hanoi.” This mode of coverage indicates that journalism no longer holds a monopoly over the discovery and initiation of information, but instead operates in a relationship of considerable dependence on citizen media and online public opinion.

However, even while maintaining a relatively neutral tone at the level of surface language, journalism still contributed to the legitimation of crowd emotions and judgments through its choice of interpretive frames. The frequent citation of outraged social media comments and the repeated emphasis on the “anger,” “indignation,” or “waves of condemnation” expressed by the public served to reproduce and reinforce collective emotions within the journalistic sphere. In this context, the boundary between reflecting public opinion and amplifying it became blurred, rendering journalism an inadvertent secondary channel for the dissemination of moral judgments that had already been formed on social media.

“On social media, the clip and related information about the incident attracted significant public attention. Many users expressed outrage, arguing that assaulting a café employee simply for reminding a customer not to smoke is unacceptable, and calling for strict handling by authorities as a deterrent. A considerable number of comments were sarcastic and indignant, criticizing what they perceived as a ‘delusion of power’ displayed by the individual in the clip. One user wrote: ‘This incident must be dealt with seriously to

avoid setting a negative precedent, especially given its widespread circulation on social media, which may encourage young people to adopt uncivilized behavior in public, including thuggish conduct and illusions of power.” (Thanh Nien, September 19, 2025)

At a subsequent stage, as the identity and personal information of the central figure were gradually disclosed, many news articles expanded their coverage to include aspects of private life, educational background, business activities, and social relationships. This contributed to the construction of the individual as a negative symbol, closely associated with discourses of abuse of power, arrogance, and a lack of appropriate behavioral norms.

From a communication perspective, this process can be understood as the “personalization of the event,” whereby the incident was not presented merely as a violation of conduct but was closely tied to the moral character of the individual involved. Such an approach intensified the weight of condemnation and accelerated the process of public humiliation on a societal scale.

Another noteworthy aspect is the role of journalism in creating a sense that a “moral verdict” had already been reached, even while legal procedures were still underway. Although many articles mentioned that the police were verifying and handling the case in accordance with the law, relatively little space was devoted to analyzing the legal rights of the parties involved or the risks of online violence directed at the targeted individual. This absence tilted journalistic discourse toward reinforcing social consensus rather than opening up space for reflection and dialogue.

In the final stage of the event, when the “*Tông tài*” figure appeared to issue a public apology, journalism continued to act as an

interpretive intermediary, but the discursive frame shifted markedly. News reports described the apology through emotional cues such as “remorse,” “sleeplessness,” and “wearing a mask,” thereby emphasizing the complete collapse of face and social status. The apology was presented not merely as a legal or moral act, but as a symbolic ritual marking the closure of the case in public opinion, while simultaneously reinforcing a deterrent message to society at large.

“According to Mr. T., he felt deeply ‘distressed’ and regretful for not remaining calm and for failing to restrain his younger associate, which led to the incident. ‘I did not expect things to escalate so seriously and go this far. V. is now facing legal consequences, while I am being heavily criticized by the online community,’ Mr. T. stated. Mr. T. added that both individuals had worked with the Vinh Tuy ward police until 8:00 p.m. on September 18, after which V. was detained. According to video clips shared on social media, on the morning of September 19, Mr. T., wearing a black face mask, went to the café with relatives to offer an apology. However, Ms. X. (the mother of N.M.Đ., the victim in the incident) stated that she was currently busy and not available, and that she did not wish to speak with Mr. T.” (Nguoi Lao Dong 2025)

Overall, journalism in this case did not simply reflect public opinion but actively participated in the process of legitimizing and stabilizing the crowd’s moral judgments. Through the selection of news frames, quoted sources, and narrative structures, journalism helped transform the immediate emotions circulating on social media into a socially sanctioned discourse, thereby amplifying the power of mass communication in shaping moral order and symbolic power in contemporary society.

4.3. Social Media and the Mechanism of Public Humiliation

If journalism plays the role of legitimizing and stabilizing moral judgments, social media constitute the space in which the mechanism of public humiliation is activated, operates, and reaches its highest intensity. In the “Tổng tài” case, social media – particularly Facebook – served not only as the site of initial information diffusion but also as an

environment for the construction of collective punitive discourses. Immediately after the security camera footage was posted, online communities rapidly engaged in commenting, sharing, and interpreting the event through pre-existing moral frameworks. This process demonstrates that social media do not merely reflect public opinion but function as an informal “judicial space” in which moral norms are activated and enforced through the pressure of the majority.

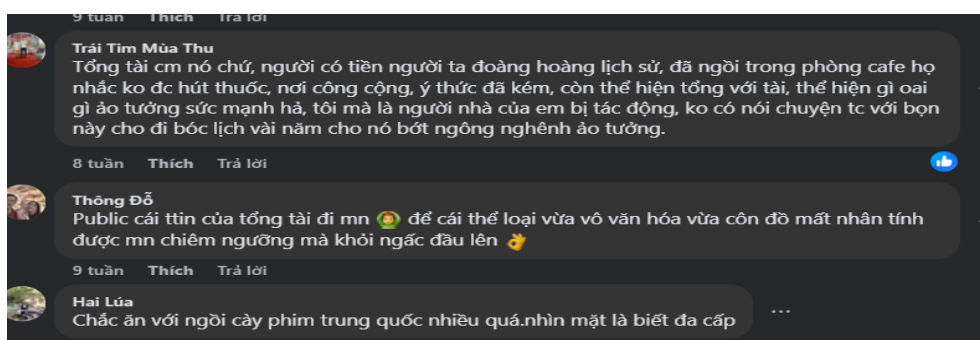


Figure 2: *Comments on Facebook: “‘CEO’? What nonsense. Truly wealthy people behave decently and respectfully. If you’re in a café and they remind you not to smoke in a public place, that’s basic awareness—you clearly lack it. And yet you try to act like some ‘big boss’? Showing off what, exactly? Some kind of delusion of power? If I were the victim’s family, I wouldn’t settle this emotionally—I’d make sure people like this get a few years behind bars so they lose that arrogant, delusional attitude.”*

“Everyone, make this so-called ‘CEO’s’ personal information public. Let people see clearly what kind of uncivilized, thuggish, and inhumane person he is—so he won’t be able to show his face again.”

“Probably spent too much time watching and imitating Chinese online content. You can tell just by looking—looks like a typical multi-level marketing type.”

A salient feature of the public humiliation mechanism on social media is the rapid deconstruction of the initial image of power. Comments, posts, and mocking memes focused on dismantling the “Tổng tài” image that the central figure sought to project, transforming the title into an ironic label rather than a symbol of authority. The repeated use of the term “Tổng tài” in

derisive contexts reveals a clear discursive strategy: stripping the title of its positive connotations of leadership and status, and redefining it as a marker of power abuse, status illusion, and a lack of cultural competence in social conduct. In this process, face was not only damaged but also symbolically inverted, shifting from

something to be protected into an object of public attack.

Beyond mockery, another key component of public humiliation was the pursuit and exposure of personal information. Numerous social media posts called for “exposés,” the “publicizing” of information, or the sharing of images and personal profiles related to the “Tống tài” figure. Although such practices were often justified by appeals to

“seeking justice” or “social warning,” they effectively expanded the scope of punishment from a specific act to the individual’s entire personal identity. This is a defining characteristic of public shaming in digital environments, where the boundary between criticizing behavior and destroying personal dignity becomes increasingly blurred.

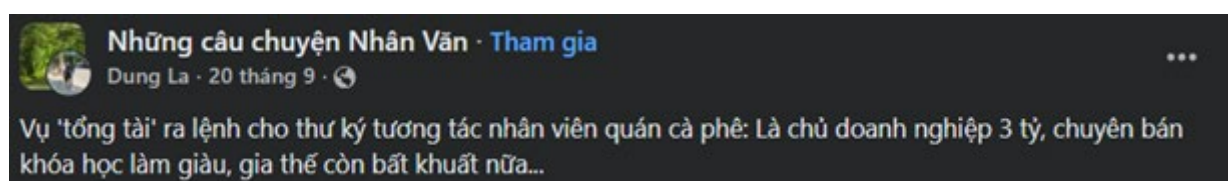


Figure 3: Comment on Facebook: (The ‘CEO’ incident: ordering a ‘subordinate’ to assault a café employee. The individual is described as the owner of a 3-billion-VND business, selling ‘get-rich’ courses, and presenting himself as coming from a prominent background...)

The mechanism of public humiliation on social media was further amplified by crowd effects and the relative anonymity of participants. Attacking, derogatory, or punitive comments multiplied rapidly through likes, shares, and replies, generating a strong sense of moral consensus. In such a context, individual users had little incentive to reflect critically or question the proportionality of social punishment, as participation in the wave of attacks simultaneously affirmed their membership in the “morally right” camp. Public humiliation thus became a performative practice, in which condemnation served not only to punish the target but also to display the moral stance of the participants themselves.

Another noteworthy aspect is the transformation of individual emotions into collective norms. Many online comments went beyond expressing indignation to calling for concrete punitive measures such as business boycotts, job dismissal, or

sanctions exceeding those prescribed by law. These calls reflect a widespread belief that legal justice alone is insufficient and must be supplemented by moral justice enforced by the community. Within this logic, public humiliation is regarded as a legitimate instrument for restoring social order and deterring deviant behavior.

At the same time, the data also reveal the distinctly ambivalent nature of this mechanism. On the one hand, the wave of online condemnation generated pressure that compelled authorities to intervene swiftly and conveyed a strong message of intolerance toward violence and contempt for service workers. On the other hand, the intensity and persistence of hostile reactions pushed the central figure into a state of social isolation, with clear manifestations of face collapse. Images of public apology, “wearing a mask,” and statements about remorse and sleeplessness illustrate the individual’s transition from a position of power assertion to one of symbolic

punishment imposed by the community. Notably, in social media spaces, apologies do not automatically terminate public humiliation. On the contrary, many responses continued to reject the sincerity of the apology, framing it as hypocrisy or as a compelled act under public pressure. This indicates that online public shaming often operates according to an exclusionary rather than restorative logic, making symbolic reintegration difficult. Once face is shattered in the digital sphere, it is rarely fully restored.

From a communication analysis perspective, social media in this case functioned as an informal power institution in which moral norms were enforced through collective pressure and public humiliation. While this mechanism reflects legitimate demands for justice and moral outrage in response to violence, it also exposes serious risks related to online violence, privacy violations, and the disproportion between wrongful acts and social punishment. Studying the mechanism of public humiliation in social media thus not only deepens our understanding of mass communication dynamics but also raises critical questions about ethical boundaries and social responsibility in the digital age.

4.4. The “Power – Loss of Face – Public Humiliation” Model

Based on the analysis of the “*Tổng tài*” case, this study proposes a revised analytical model that conceptualizes mass communication as a dynamic process involving four interrelated components: power, loss of face, and public humiliation. Rather than representing a simple sequence of events, the model emphasizes the mechanisms through which symbolic power is redistributed and moral judgments are socially constructed and amplified in digital media environments.

The first stage of the model concerns the exercise and contestation of power within an everyday interaction. In this case, power is manifested in both its legitimate form (associated with the café employee’s role) and its positional or symbolic form (constructed by the “*Tổng tài*” figure through status display and self-identification). The conflict emerges when these forms of power collide, resulting in a perceived threat to social image.

This leads to the second stage, the loss of face, in which the individual’s social image collapses once the incident becomes publicly visible. In the digital environment, face is no longer controlled by the individual but is reconstructed through collective observation and interpretation. The exposure of violent behavior transforms the individual from a subject of interaction into an object of public scrutiny, creating the conditions for broader social reactions.

A key contribution of the revised model is the identification of journalism as a mediating institution connecting the second and third stages. Journalism does not merely report the event but actively participates in the legitimation of public opinion through framing practices, the selection of sources, and the amplification of dominant emotional narratives. By translating dispersed reactions from social media into coherent and socially recognized discourses, journalism stabilizes and institutionalizes moral judgments. In this sense, journalism functions as an intermediary that connects individual actions with crowd reactions, shaping how events are interpreted at the societal level.

The final stage involves the full activation of public humiliation as a mechanism of collective social sanction. On social media, moral judgments are intensified through practices such as mockery, derogatory labeling, the exposure of personal information, and calls for punishment. These

practices not only reinforce the collapse of face but also redistribute symbolic power from the individual to the collective.

Importantly, the model suggests that this process is cyclical rather than linear. Public humiliation feeds back into the ongoing erosion of face, while attempts at apology or image restoration are often reinterpreted within the same moral framework, further reinforcing collective judgment. Through this mechanism, mass communication operates not simply as a channel of information but as a structured system of power, in which journalism plays a crucial mediating role in transforming individual actions into socially sanctioned moral narratives.

Importantly, the proposed model should not be understood as a simple linear sequence of stages, but rather as a mechanism characterized by feedback loops and the continuous redistribution of symbolic power. In this process, each component does not merely follow the previous one but actively reshapes it. The collapse of face, once publicly visible, triggers collective moral judgment, which is then amplified and legitimized through journalistic mediation and social media interaction. These reactions, in turn, further intensify the erosion of face, creating a recursive dynamic rather than a one-directional progression.

From this perspective, public humiliation does not represent a final outcome but functions as a reproductive mechanism that feeds back into earlier stages of the process. The intensification of mockery, condemnation, and exposure on social media reinforces the individual's loss of face, deepening social discredit and limiting the possibility of recovery. Notably, attempts at apology or image restoration are often reinterpreted within the same discursive framework of suspicion and

moral judgment, thereby failing to restore face and instead becoming additional elements within the cycle of humiliation.

5. Discussion

The findings from the “*Tổng tài*” case indicate that mass communication in Vietnam's digital society is no longer merely a mechanism for information transmission, but has evolved into a form of social power capable of shaping moral norms, redistributing symbolic power, and deeply intervening in individual lives. The analytical sequence—from the initial collapse of face, through the legitimizing role of journalism, to the operation of public humiliation on social media—reveals a complex social process in which the boundaries between legitimate moral response and excessive punishment become increasingly fragile.

First, the study clarifies shifts in power relations within the digital media context. The positional power that the central figure believed he possessed—grounded in economic displays, honorific titles, and social connections—proved ineffective when confronted with the counter-power of online public opinion. In digital spaces, power no longer operates according to traditional hierarchical logic, but is instead dispersed and reconfigured through the public's capacity to observe, comment, and circulate content. This suggests that in contemporary Vietnamese society, social media are increasingly assuming the role of an informal social surveillance institution, in which behaviors deemed deviant can be rapidly subjected to public “trial.”

Second, the study highlights the fragility of face in the digital media era. In Vietnamese cultural contexts, face traditionally constitutes a crucial foundation of social status and communal relationships.

However, when personal images and behaviors are digitized, detached from their original interactional contexts, and placed under continuous public scrutiny, face becomes more vulnerable than ever. The case demonstrates that attempts to restore face through coercive power not only fail but also propel individuals into a spiral of face loss at the societal level. This insight invites a rethinking of social interaction strategies and personal image management in contemporary media environments.

Another significant contribution of the study lies in its clarification of the dual nature of public humiliation. On the one hand, the data suggest that online public shaming can function as a deterrent and a mechanism for regulating social norms. Public pressure compelled authorities to respond swiftly and conveyed a strong message of zero tolerance toward violence and contempt for service workers. In this respect, public humiliation may be understood as an expression of moral justice demands in contexts where public trust in the timely responsiveness of formal institutions is limited.

On the other hand, the study also exposes serious risks when this mechanism operates without clear boundaries. The expansion of punishment from specific behaviors to an individual's entire identity, private life, and social status allows public humiliation to exceed its normative regulatory function and approach prolonged symbolic violence. The data indicate that even after the central figure issued a public apology, online public opinion continued to reject its validity, interpreting it as a compelled response to social pressure rather than genuine remorse. This suggests that public shaming in digital environments tends to be more exclusionary than restorative, significantly diminishing individuals' prospects for symbolic reintegration.

The role of journalism within this dynamic also warrants deeper discussion. The findings show that journalism does not merely reflect public opinion but actively participates in legitimizing and stabilizing crowd-based moral judgments through the selection of news frames, quoted sources, and narrative discourse. This raises critical questions about the social responsibility of journalism in an era of competition for speed and clicks, particularly when confronting waves of online outrage. The relative absence of countervailing perspectives grounded in human rights and legal considerations in much of the coverage underscores the risk of journalism being drawn into the logic of mass communication rather than maintaining its role as a mediator and guide.

From a theoretical standpoint, the "Power – Loss of Face – Public Humiliation" model proposed in this study contributes an interdisciplinary analytical framework to communication research in Vietnam. The model demonstrates that these elements do not exist in isolation but interact dynamically within a cyclical process, in which individual power can be rapidly neutralized, face dismantled, and public humiliation becomes a dominant instrument of social punishment. Identifying this cycle is crucial for understanding and anticipating societal reactions to similar events in the future.

Finally, the study offers broader implications for media governance and social ethics in the digital age. As mass communication increasingly acquires the capacity to produce de facto "moral verdicts," establishing boundaries between legitimate social critique and online violence becomes an urgent task. This challenge requires not only policy and legal adjustments but also reflexive responsibility on the part of journalism, social media

platforms, and user communities in exercising communicative power in a more accountable and ethical manner.

This qualitative study does not aim to generalize its findings to all Vietnamese media or public opinion contexts. Rather, it is positioned as an exploratory case study that seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms of mass communication in a specific and highly visible incident. As such, it has several features. First, the research is based on a single case study, and the relevance of the findings to other contexts or types of media events would require further investigation. Second, the study focuses primarily on Facebook as the dominant platform through which the incident was circulated and amplified, and other digital platforms may have different communicative dynamics. Third, the data are confined to a specific time frame, capturing only the immediate development of the event, and therefore may not fully reflect longer-term processes of public perception or reputation recovery. Future research could conduct comparative case studies across different types of media events, applying quantitative methods to test and validate the proposed model on a larger dataset, and exploring cross-cultural analyses to examine how the dynamics of power, face, and public humiliation operate in different socio-cultural contexts.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the “*Tổng tài*” case as a representative example of how power, face, and public humiliation operate within Vietnam’s digital media environment. Using a qualitative case study approach, the study demonstrates how a localized communicative conflict can rapidly escalate into a large-scale social event through the interaction of social media

and journalism. The findings show that the collapse of face in this case resulted from the attempt to restore threatened social image through positional power and violence. In digital environments, however, such attempts can instead trigger the counter-power of online public opinion, leading to widespread moral condemnation and the loss of control over one’s public image.

Based on these findings, the article proposes the “Power – Loss of Face – Public Humiliation” model as an analytical framework for understanding the dynamics of mass communication in digital society. The model highlights how symbolic power is challenged and redistributed through the collapse of face and the activation of collective moral judgment. Journalism plays an important mediating role by legitimizing and stabilizing public opinion through framing practices and moralized narratives, while social media intensifies public humiliation through mockery, exposure of personal information, and calls for punishment. The study further suggests that public humiliation is not simply an outcome but a recurring mechanism within a cycle of symbolic power redistribution.

From both theoretical and practical perspectives, the study contributes an interdisciplinary approach to communication research in Vietnam by linking media studies, sociology, and cultural studies through the concepts of face and public humiliation. At the same time, the findings raise important concerns regarding media governance, journalistic ethics, and the social responsibility of digital platforms and online communities. As mass communication increasingly functions as a form of informal “moral judgment,” establishing clearer boundaries between legitimate public criticism and symbolic

violence becomes an urgent challenge in the digital age.

Declaration of AI Use

This manuscript has utilized AI-assisted tools (Chat GPT) to enhance the quality of translation and academic expression.

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