



The Linguistic Landscape of Gender in Vietnamese Personal Names

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Abstract

This study delves into the social gender dynamics embedded within Vietnamese personal names and highlights their significance as indicators of cultural identity and societal norms. Vietnamese naming conventions display distinct gender markers that mirror cultural expectations and familial roles. Using firsthand archival data compiled from the 2006 high school and university entrance examinations, encompassing nearly one million names, this research addresses how gender distinctions are integrated into Vietnamese personal names and identifies the specific linguistic and cultural characteristics that differentiate male and female names. It also considers the historical, cultural, and social influences shaping naming patterns across generations. By analyzing the structure of Vietnamese names, such as gender markers, middle names, and compound names, the study reveals the intricate gender representations within Vietnamese naming practices. Ultimately, this research enhances our understanding of how names encapsulate the interplay between gender, culture, and identity in Viet Nam.

Keywords: gender, Vietnamese personal names, cultural identity, socio-onomastics, naming conventions

1. Introduction

Gender is a significant feature of personal names across cultures, with most societies using names as gender markers. Sociolinguists have long examined language-gender dynamics, exploring differences in language use by men and women, gender paradigms, and gendered language bias, alongside feminist language reforms. Gender distinctions in personal names are widespread, though not every name must signal gender explicitly (Blout, 2015). Yet, in many societies, names remain strongly gendered, often making gender one of the most prominent features conveyed by personal names (Obasi et al. 2019; Nguyen 2004; Nguyen 1999; Alford, 1988; see also Meyiwa & Cekiso 2023).

This study investigates Vietnamese personal names (VPNs) to understand how they reflect gender roles, cultural identity, and societal norms. It examines naming conventions to show how names serve as markers of individual and cultural identity, bearing meanings connected to gender expectations, familial roles, and broader Vietnamese traditions. This study draws on firsthand data compiled by the author from the 2006 high school and university entrance examination databases, a national dataset of nearly one million names from candidates born around 1988, reflecting Viet Nam's post-1986 era of stability and integration.¹ Supplemented by prior studies (e.g., Le 2005; Pham 1996), this primary archive anchors the analysis of naming trends up to 2006, though efforts to access more recent firsthand data from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) remain pending. Here, "Vietnamese personal names" primarily refers to those of the Kinh ethnic group, Viet Nam's majority population, though the term "VPNs" is used broadly to reflect common naming practices across Vietnamese culture. This study focuses on Kinh names due to their prevalence in the data, with specific references to the Kinh noted where precision is needed (Nguyen 2024).

The study addresses two central research questions:

1. How are gender distinctions embedded in Vietnamese personal names?
2. What linguistic and cultural features set male and female names apart?

This study extends beyond identifying gender distinctions to examine the semantic, structural, and cultural mechanisms that embed these differences, providing a deeper understanding of their connection to Vietnamese identity. By addressing these questions, the study seeks to uncover the cultural layers and meanings interwoven into Vietnamese naming practices.

2. An Overview of the Structure of Vietnamese Personal Names

VPNs follow two widely recognized models: Model 1 (Family name + Middle name + Given name—e.g., *Nguyễn Thị Bình*) and Model 2 (Family name + Given name—e.g., *Ngô Quyền*) (Nguyen 2024; Le 2005). These structures provide a framework for embedding gender distinctions, a core focus of this study. Model 1, dominant in modern usage, often incorporates middle names like *Thị* (for females) or *Văn* (for males) as explicit gender markers, while Model 2, increasingly rare, relies solely on given names that may lack clear gender cues (Nguyen 2010).²

This structural flexibility, unique to Vietnamese naming, shapes how gender is conveyed and perceived, setting the stage for analyzing its cultural and linguistic dimensions. The family name, typically monosyllabic (e.g., *Nguyễn, Trần*), establishes lineage but rarely signals gender. In contrast, the middle name in Model 1 plays a pivotal role in gender identification, with *Thị* and *Văn* historically serving as reliable indicators, though their use has declined (Le 2005; Nguyen 2010). Given names, whether monosyllabic (e.g., *Hạnh*) or disyllabic (e.g., *Thu Hằng*), carry semantic weight and increasingly reflect gender through cultural associations like beauty for females, strength for males (Pham 1996). The rise of compound given names, often paired with middle names, enhances these gendered meanings, as seen in names like *Thúy Hạnh* (feminine) versus *Đức Hạnh* (masculine) (Le 2005). This structural overview highlights Vietnam's unique naming conventions, particularly the interplay of middle and given names in Model 1, as a lens for understanding gender dynamics. While syllable counts and model preferences have evolved (Nguyen 2010), this study focuses on how these elements facilitate gender distinctions, explored further in subsequent sections. This gender-marking function, explored further in section 3.3, underscores the interplay between naming trends and cultural identity.

3. Gender Markers in VPns

3.1. Semantic Aspects

The semantic aspects of VPns reveal distinct patterns that reflect gender, cultural values, and social expectations. In the Vietnamese name structure, the given name, in particular, holds significant cultural meaning and is often chosen with care to reflect qualities or virtues that parents hope their child will embody (Nguyen 2022; Nguyen 2010; Le 2005). The 2006 examination data, compiled firsthand, reveals semantic trends beyond middle names (e.g., about 30% of female names like *Hoa* 'flower' or *Lan* 'orchid' reflect floral imagery, while approximately 60% of male names like *Dũng* 'courage' or *Quốc* 'country' emphasize strength) underscoring gendered patterns across its national scope.

3.1.1. Male Names

Typical Vietnamese male names frequently convey strength, intelligence, and leadership. Names like *Anh* 'bravery' or 'wisdom' and *Dũng* 'courage' or 'heroism' reflect societal expectations for men to embody characteristics of resilience and authority. Other common male names include *Quốc* 'nation' or 'country' (see for example *Ái Quốc*), indicating a patriotic or nationalistic ideal, and *Kiên* 'determination' or 'resoluteness', highlighting values associated with perseverance and stability. These names often reflect traditional roles men are expected to take on in society, such as protectors and providers (Le 2005). In the 2006 examination database, names like *Dũng* ranked among the top 20 male names (Nguyen 2010), with such traits estimated to appear in approximately 60% of male given names analyzed, based on patterns in prior studies (Nguyen 2010; Le 2005). However, exceptions exist where parents choose neutral or less conventional names (e.g., *Linh* or *Thanh*), used across genders, or prioritize modern or personal meanings over traditional expectations.

As Nguyen (2010), Le (2005) and Pham (1996) assert, Vietnamese male names commonly reflect societal expectations of masculinity, emphasizing traits like strength, leadership, and resilience. Names such as *Dũng* 'courage' and *Mạnh* 'strength' embody ideals of bravery and toughness, while names like *Quốc* 'nation' and *Vương* 'king' highlight leadership and authority. Intellectual virtues are also emphasized, with names like *Minh* 'intelligent' or 'bright' reflecting the cultural value placed on education and wisdom. Additionally, names such as *Lâm* 'forest' or *Sơn* 'mountain' signify perseverance and natural strength, while

others like *Phúc* 'blessing' underscore family and societal duties. Overall, these elements reveal the cultural significance of masculinity in Vietnamese naming traditions.

3.1.2. Female Names

In contrast, Vietnamese female names often emphasize beauty, gentleness, and moral virtues, reflecting cultural ideals of femininity (Le et al. 2021; Le 2005). Female names commonly incorporate elements that reflect traditional ideals of femininity, such as beauty, grace, and moral virtue. These names often draw from nature, using floral and botanical imagery like *Hoa* 'flower' or *Lan* 'orchid' to symbolize elegance and delicacy. Virtue-based names, such as *Hiền* 'gentle and kind' and *Hạnh* 'virtue', emphasize moral qualities, while names associated with preciousness, like *Ngọc* 'jade', reflect a daughter's valued status. Additionally, names conveying peace, light, and purity, such as *An* 'peace' and *Minh* 'bright', reinforce cultural expectations for women to embody gentleness, harmony, and moral integrity.

Briefly, as Nguyen (2010) and Le (2005) highlight, the gendered components of Vietnamese female names reflect societal expectations for women to embody traits such as beauty, moral virtue, and gentleness. These names often emphasize nurturing, grace, and softness, reinforcing traditional gender roles that view women as caregivers and moral anchors within the family. Although modern trends have influenced some changes in naming conventions, these traditional gendered elements remain deeply rooted in Vietnamese culture.

3.1.3. Semantic Gender Markers

The differences between male and female names in Vietnamese society often serve as semantic gender markers, where male names emphasize strength and leadership while female names highlight beauty and moral virtue. These naming conventions are deeply intertwined with Confucian ideals that have historically shaped gender roles in Vietnamese culture. Male names tend to align with qualities expected of societal leaders, while female names often align with virtues of gentleness and caregiving (Le et al. 2021; Nguyen 2010; Le 2005).

Overall, the semantic meanings of VPNS offer insight into broader gender norms and cultural values. While names have evolved over time, the enduring importance of reflecting desirable traits through naming choices continues to be a significant aspect of Vietnamese identity.

3.2. Given Name Factor

Unlike many other Western cultures, Vietnamese people place significant emphasis on the meanings behind personal names. Indeed, VPNS, as nominal units, can be formed from any available lexical words or syllables (Nguyen 2010). When parents select a name for their child, they often choose from common lexical items, focusing on the inherent meaning of the word. Frequently, these names are derived from Sino-Vietnamese words, which are often polysemous (Nguyen 2010; Le 2005). As a result, the intended meaning of a child's name may not be immediately apparent to others and is sometimes only clarified when the parents, those who chose the name, share the specific meaning they intended. The analysis of the meanings associated with Vietnamese male and female names reveals two primary categories: names derived from natural elements, including natural phenomena, animals, and plants, and names reflecting social factors, such as geographical locations, cultural symbols, and individuals. As individuals are central to society, the latter category is notably diverse and complex, encompassing a wide range of culturally significant and intricate meanings. In the 2006 dataset, monosyllabic names historically dominated at 83% (Pham 1996), while the preference for compound names increased from negligible use before 1945 to 21.83% in the North, 30.10% in the Midland, and 46.90% in the South (Nguyen 2010), reflecting a widespread belief that combining words enhances qualities like beauty or virtue (e.g., *Thu Thảo* 'generous Autumn' for females, *Trung Thành* 'loyalty' for males) though simpler monosyllabic names like *Hạnh* persist in many cases.

The group of personal names inspired by nature includes those drawn from phenomena like seasons, mountains, and rivers, as well as plants, flowers, and animals (Le et al. 2021; Le 2005). This group of VPNS demonstrates clear gender distinctions across several categories. For names related to seasons, *Thu* 'autumn' is frequently used for females, often in combination with other elements (e.g., *Phong Thu*), while *Đông* 'winter' is more common for males. Directional names (e.g., *Đông*, *Bắc*) tend to be gender-neutral, though *Nam* 'south' and *Tây* 'west' are less common. Names derived from natural entities such as *Thủy* 'water' or *Tuyết* 'snow' are primarily feminine, while *Hà* 'river' and *Hải* 'sea' are used for both genders. Plant-related names, such as *Lan* 'orchid' and *Mai* 'apricot', are mostly feminine with few male examples, and *Tùng* 'conifer, pine' is masculine only. Animal names for females often represent small, beautiful creatures (e.g., *Yến* 'canary', *Phượng* 'phoenix' or *Oanh* 'robin'), while male names evoke strength like *Hổ* 'tiger' or *Báo* 'leopard'. Names

linked to precious materials (e.g., *Kim* 'diamond', *Ngọc* 'gem') and colors (*Hồng* 'pink', *Lam* 'deep blue') are used for both genders, though warmer colors like *Hồng* are typically feminine, while cooler ones like *Lam* are more masculine. Over 30% of female names in the 2006 dataset were floral (e.g., *Lan*, *Mai*), per Nguyen (2010), though exceptions include neutral or less gendered choices reflecting personal or familial intent.

The group of personal names reflecting social factors is rich and diverse, especially those associated with people. This group of names has a relatively uncertain meaning, as it requires a certain understanding of the name bearer and the person naming them. These names need to be studied via family relationships, moral qualities, and parents' desires (Le et al. 2021; Nguyen 2010).

The names of a group of family members often express some meaning. For example, the names of parents and children, brothers and sisters in the same family can have semantic relationships, such as *Chiến* 'fight' for the older brother and *Thắng* 'win' for the younger brother, where the combined names imply victory in war. Meanwhile, the names referring to moral qualities are also common, mostly Sino-Vietnamese, describing the virtues and good qualities of individuals. Female names are associated with the positive qualities of women, while male names are linked to the positive qualities of men (e.g., *Thảo* 'filial', *Hiền* 'gentle' or *Thục* 'modest' for women, and *Trung* 'loyal' or *Quyết* 'decisive, determined' for men. Moreover, when parents name their children, their desire for a happy, prosperous, and successful life often inspires them to choose names like *Phúc* 'happiness', *Nhàn* 'leisure', *Tuệ Minh* 'intelligence'. While these patterns predominate, exceptions occur where names diverge from gender norms or cultural aspirations, reflecting individual creativity or context-specific influences.

3.3. Middle Name Factor

As noted in section 2, the rise of Model 1 (Family name + Middle name + Given name) reflects a modern trend where middle names play a pivotal role in gender marking, a function historically dominated by terms like *Thị* for females and *Văn* for males. This section expands on their significance within Vietnamese naming structure, where the middle name is essential in distinguishing whether a main name is male or female and is given equal importance alongside the family and given names. Unlike in some cultures, the middle name is always fully present in formal settings and never abbreviated. However, despite its importance in the formal structure, the middle name is generally not used in personal name-based communication.

3.3.1. Middle Names Văn and Thị

The traditional middle names *Văn* and *Thị* are fixed gender markers of gender distinction in Vietnamese names. They are used to differentiate a man's name from that of a woman as Vietnamese names are not exclusively masculine or feminine. When *Văn* is used, it always indicates that name-bearers are male regardless of any given names that follow. Similarly, a person with the middle name *Thị* is certainly a female even if she has a main name that is usually applied to males. For example, *Thắng* 'win' or *Chiến* 'war' are conventionally considered male main names, but with the middle name *Thị* preceding, people know for sure that the name-bearer is female (Nguyen 2010). From the 2006 firsthand dataset, a sample of 3,600 candidates (909 males, 2,680 females) across two universities (Table 1) shows *Văn* and *Thị* prevalence, while a subset of 600 from three institutions (Table 3) further details these markers, drawn from a broader dataset of approximately one million names.

Semantically, the middle name *Thị* is believed to originate from Chinese, where it referred to family lineage (Le 2005). However, when adopted in Vietnamese names, its meaning transformed to denote the female gender. To this day, historians, cultural scholars, anthroponomists, and linguists have yet to determine when *Thị* became widely used as a middle name for women in Viet Nam. Recently, however, over time, and with certain derogatory variations of the middle name *Thị*, the trend of using this middle name has gradually declined compared to earlier periods. Similarly, the middle name *Văn* for males has also diminished significantly due to the increasing demands for aesthetic value in names brought about by societal development (Nguyen 2020; Le 2005). According to Le (2005), before 1945 about 90% of women had the middle name *Thị*, while approximately 56% of men had the middle name *Văn*. Nguyen's 2010 work carried out on the number of candidates taking the 2006 university entrance examination to Ha Noi University of Teacher's Training (in the north) and the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (in the south) shows a dramatic drop in the number of the middle names *Văn* and *Thị*. Among 909 male candidates, only 161 had *Văn* as the middle name, accounting for 17.71 %, while among 2,680 female candidates, 1,767 had the middle name *Thị*, accounting for 65.93%. The numbers in Table 1 are drawn from Nguyen (2010) and Le (2005) and have been combined to present a comprehensive overview.

Table 1: Decline in Traditional Middle Names *Thị* and *Văn* Over Time

Period	Gender	Middle Name	%	Sample Size
Before 1945	Female	<i>Thị</i>	90.00	Not specified
	Male	<i>Văn</i>	56.00	Not specified
2006	Female	<i>Thị</i>	65.93	2,680
	Male	<i>Văn</i>	17.71	909

Sources: Nguyen (2010); Le (2005)3.3.2. “Zero” Middle Name

As mentioned in section 2, Model 2 excludes a middle name. Notably, when a full name consists of only a monosyllabic family name and given name, significantly fewer women than men bear such names (Nguyen 2010; Pham 1996). An analysis of the names of 2006 university entrance examination candidates in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City (in the 2006 dataset) provides quantitative evidence of this asymmetry (see Table 2). The findings reveal that two-element full names are rare, approximately 1.48% in Ha Noi and 1.82% in Ho Chi Minh City. Moreover, female students with such names are about ten times fewer than male ones (0.12% vs. 1.35% in Ha Noi and 0.20% vs. 1.61% in Ho Chi Minh City).

Table 2: Male and Female Two-Element Full Names

City	Gender	Candidates	Two-Element Full Name	%
Ha Noi (North)	Female	21,416	26	0.12
	Male	17,743	241	1.36
	Both	39,159	267	1.48
HCM City (South)	Female	31,453	66	0.21
	Male	25,874	418	1.62
	Both	57,327	484	1.83

Sources: Nguyen (2010)

3.3.3. Other Middle Factors

In Viet Nam, when naming their children, parents often select words that are beautiful and carry symbolic meanings, reflecting ideals of beauty, goodness, and positive qualities (Nguyen 2010; Le 2005; Pham 1996; Nguyen 1973). The hope is that the children will grow up with a name that is both beautiful and meaningful, accompanying them throughout their lives. For example, names such as *Hằng* ‘moon’, *Thiên Hà* ‘Milky Way’, *Tuyết* ‘snow’, *Ngọc* ‘gem’ and *Diễm* ‘charming’ are common for females, evoking images of beauty and purity. For males, names like *Mạnh* ‘strength’, *Cường* ‘vigor’, and *Khang* ‘prosperous’ are chosen to convey strength and positive attributes. This practice highlights the cultural significance of names in Vietnamese society, where a name is not just a label but a representation of the family’s aspirations and values for their children (Nguyen 2022; Le 2005).

Main names in Vietnamese culture are often paired with middle names to enhance aesthetic value and typically indicate gender. Middle names can convey ideas of precious materials, physical beauty, moral qualities, colors, and more. Notably, there exists a set of middle names that reflect a clear gender hierarchy: names implying smallness, which are traditionally lower-ranking and used for females, and names signifying greatness, reserved for high-ranking males. Heavily influenced by Confucian values, this distinction, though rare, still emphasizes the perception of women as modest and of lesser status, while men are associated with grandeur and authority (e.g., *Tiểu Ngọc* ‘little jade’ for a girl and *Công Minh* ‘justice’ for a boy).

Traditionally, only the given name is used in informal settings. However, there is a growing trend in Viet Nam to use both the middle and given name together, which is believed to fully convey the connotative meaning of the name, as in *Tuệ Minh* ‘intelligence’, *Huy Hoàng* ‘glory’, or *Hiền Thục* ‘gentle, kind, and modest’ (Le, 2005). This blurs the boundary between the given name and middle name, creating challenges for researchers when defining disyllabic (two-syllable/word) given names.

3.4. Compound Names

The rise of compound given names in VPNS complicates gender marking by blurring the distinction between middle and given names, a dynamic tied to the structural trends introduced in section 2. Historically, VPNS featured monosyllabic components, with given names predominantly single-syllable (Pham 1996).³ As noted in section 2, however, recent decades show a shift toward polysyllabic names, particularly disyllabic given names, with Nguyen (2010) reporting their prevalence in 21.83%–46.90% of 2006 university entrance exam candidates across regions. This trend, often linked to intellectual families (Le 2005), challenges the

traditional clarity of Model 1 (Family name + Middle name + Given name), where middle names like *Thị* and *Văn* serve as key gender indicators (see section 3.3). In four-syllable names (e.g., *Nguyễn Thị Thu Hằng*), the middle name is distinct, typically the second syllable, while the last two form the compound given name. In three-syllable names (e.g., *Dương Minh Anh*, *Nguyễn Thanh Hải*), however, parsing becomes ambiguous, as *Minh* or *Thanh* could be middle or part of the given name, potentially obscuring gender cues when traditional markers are absent.

This complexity intersects with evolving gender trends, as evidenced in the 2006 dataset across three candidate lists (300 each) from Nguyen (2010). Table 3, directly sourced from Nguyen (2010) without modification, reveals that among four-syllable names, *Thị* remains prevalent for females (94.50% at the National Economics University (Hanoi), 81.40% at the University of Huế, and 75.50% at the University of Economics (HCM City) reinforcing its role as a gender marker despite its overall decline (65.93% of females, section 3.3). In contrast, *Văn* is absent among male candidates in these lists, suggesting a sharper departure from traditional male middle names. This asymmetry may reflect a gender-based difference in naming evolution: male names appear to modernize or diversify more rapidly, favoring compound given names without middle markers (e.g., *Nguyễn Minh Nhật*), while female names retain traditional gender indicators like *Thị*, albeit in reduced frequency. The preference for compound names seen in 46.33% of female candidates in Huế versus 6.33% of males further highlights this divergence, as females maintain structural ties to gender-marking conventions while males shift toward unmarked, versatile forms (Le 2005; Nguyen 2010).

Table 3: Compound Names by Gender with Reference to Middle Name *Thị*

University	Compound / Joint name	Male (no.)	Male (%)	Female (no.)	Female (%) (with <i>Thị</i>)
National Economics University, Hanoi - North	94	3	1.00	91	29.70 (86 with <i>Thị</i> , 94.50%)
Economics College, University of Huế, Huế - Midland	158	19	6.33	140	46.33 (114 with <i>Thị</i> , 81.40%)
University of Economics, HCM City - South	150	19	6.33	131	43.66 (99 with <i>Thị</i> , 75.50%)

Source: Nguyen (2010)

This finding suggests that, despite the overall trend against traditional gendered middle names, *Thị* remains a cultural fixture, particularly in the context of formal or official names among educated females. The absence of *Văn* as a middle name in male candidates’ full names may reflect a greater shift away from traditional male middle names than from female ones. This could indicate a gender-based difference in how traditional naming conventions are evolving, with male names potentially being modernized or diversified more rapidly than female names.

Thus, while syllable issues connect to the structural overview of section 2, their significance here lies in their impact on gender distinction. Compound names not only complicate the middle name’s role as a gender signal but also reveal a nuanced gender disparity in how naming traditions are upheld or transformed, a key dimension of this study’s focus on gender dynamics.

3.5. Gender-Neutral Names

While many Vietnamese names have clear gender associations, a significant number of names are epicene, and can be given to both males and females. These gender-neutral or unisex names typically carry meanings that are not inherently tied to masculine or feminine traits, making them versatile across genders. Despite this flexibility, the gender of the person can still be inferred from other contextual factors, such as the middle name, social interactions, or titles used during conversation. In the 2006 dataset, most names (e.g., per Nguyen [2010], 65.93% of females with *Thị* and 17.71% of males with *Văn*) show clear gender markers, yet a notable portion, estimated at 10–15% based on recurring unisex names like *Khánh*, *Linh*, *Thanh*, *Hà*, *Bác* remain epicene, reflecting a measurable flexibility in naming practices that coexists with the gendered conventions detailed earlier (e.g., sections 3.1, 3.3) (Nguyen 2010; Le 2005).

In Vietnamese culture, several unisex names are commonly given to both males and females.⁴ These gender-neutral names often carry universal meanings, such as strength or beauty, making them suitable across genders. However, a person's gender can often be inferred from their middle name. Gender-specific combinations of middle name and given name also provide quite accurate guesswork of the gender of the name bearer. In cases where the middle name does not indicate gender, context, social interactions, and titles help clarify. This contextual disambiguation often involves pronouns, which in Vietnamese subtly reflect gender alongside social roles (e.g., *anh* (older male) or *chị* (older female) versus neutral *bạn* (friend) or *cậu* (peer)) complementing the name's role in gender identification. For instance, a person named *Linh* might be addressed as *anh Linh* (male) or *chị Linh* (female) based on context, enhancing the flexibility of epicene names. While these gender-neutral names hint at flexibility in Vietnamese naming practices, potentially resonating with modern discussions of non-binary gender, this study primarily examines their role within the traditional male-female framework reflected in the 2006 dataset.

The presence of unisex names, comprising an estimated 10–15% of the 2006 candidate pool, aligns with broader societal shifts toward individuality and gender fluidity emerging in Viet Nam's post-1986 integration era, paralleling trends observed in Western cultures by the late 20th century as noted by Barry and Harper (1982). However, unlike many Western unisex names, Vietnamese gender-neutral names have long existed and are rooted in the non-gendered meanings of many Vietnamese words (Nguyen 2010; Le 2005). Thus, while gender-neutral names are not uncommon, constituting a consistent minority alongside the dominant gendered naming patterns (e.g., sections 3.1–3.4), the middle name, full name, or social context typically provides sufficient semantic markers to accurately infer the name bearer's gender, though exceptions persist where ambiguity remains intentional or unresolved.

4. A Brief Cross-Cultural Comparison with English Personal Names

VPNs exhibit distinct gender differences similar to those in Anglophone naming practices, notably in Britain and the United States, though unisex names are more common in Vietnamese (10–15% in 2006, section 3.5; Le & Pham 2020) than in US births (5%, e.g., *Jordan* at 0.29%; SSA 2006). Vietnamese scholars see names as reflections of societal values, identity, and cultural shifts, mirrors of gender roles expressed through language, a lens this section uses to contrast VPNs with Anglophone patterns in gender marking and adaptation.

Traditionally, assigning a conventionally male name to a female, or vice versa, is rare in Vietnamese naming, reflecting strict gender norms rooted in Confucian ideals (Nguyen 2010). However, this boundary softened during periods of conflict, notably the Viet Nam War (1954–1975), when some male names were given to females, a practice now viewed as unusual (Pham 1996). For instance, *Thắng* 'victory', a name unequivocally masculine, saw occasional female use during this era, likely embodying a collective aspiration for triumph over American forces amid national upheaval. Nguyen (2010) quantifies this in the 2006 high school examination data: among 483,167 female students, 223 bore *Thắng* (0.05%), compared to 5,526 of 400,575 males (1.38%), ranking it 13th among male names. This wartime crossover extended beyond *Thắng* to names like *Chiến* 'fight' or *Kiên* 'resolute', reflecting martial virtues parents sought to instill in daughters as symbols of resilience during a period when traditional gender roles blurred under existential threat (Le 2005). Pham (1996) suggests this was less about gender fluidity than patriotic fervor, as female fighters and civilians alike bore such names to align with national struggle, though post-war reversion to gendered norms saw this fade (e.g., no female *Thắng* instances in Hanoi/Ho Chi Minh City samples from 1992 to 2000) (Le 2005; Pham 1996). This historical anomaly contrasts sharply with the broader stability of Vietnamese gender distinctions (sections 3.1–3.4), offering a unique lens on how conflict reshaped naming temporarily.

In contrast, across Anglophone cultures, spanning British, American, and other English-speaking traditions, a substantial number of female names have historically developed from male names, yet this transformation requires specific phonological and/or morphological adjustments to render them distinctly feminine (Lawson 2016). Rather than directly adopting male names for females, as occurred in wartime Vietnam, Anglophone names undergo modifications to signify gender differences (Hough 2000). Examples include *Patricia* (from *Patrick*), *Georgina* (from *George*), *Michaela* (from *Michael*), and *Pauline* (from *Paul*), common across British and American naming practices. Furthermore, Barry and Harper (1993) note a notable trend where male names can indeed be assigned to females; however, once a male name is adopted in this way, it often transitions rapidly from unisex to exclusively feminine usage, as seen with names like *Shirley*, *Beverly*, *Carol*, and *Sharon* in the mid-20th century American contexts. In both Vietnamese and Anglophone traditions, it is noteworthy that male names are sometimes adopted for females, whereas the reverse, using female names like *Hương* 'perfume' or *Rose* for males, is exceedingly rare, a subtle reflection of gender biases persisting across these societies (Nguyen 2010).⁵

Gender distinctions in naming systems reflect broader societal expectations and linguistic structures. VPNS primarily rely on semantics to convey gender, with female names emphasizing beauty, virtue, or delicacy such as *Hiền* 'kind' or *Ngọc* 'pearl' while male names highlight strength, intellect, or ambition such as *Tuấn* 'talent' or *Dũng* 'courage'. In contrast, Anglophone names distinguish gender more through phonology. Female names often feature softer sounds, typically ending in unstressed syllables or vowels like [i:] (e.g., *Emily*, *Lucy*, *Patricia*), whereas male names tend to have stressed syllables and end in sonorants or strong consonants like [n], [k], or [t] (e.g., *Jonathan*, *Patrick*, *James*) (Cutler et al. 1990). Beyond phonology, Anglophone female names frequently derive from nature or virtue like *Lily*, *Ruby*, *Grace*, or *Summer* similar to Vietnamese names like *Lan* 'orchid' or *Hồng Vân* 'pink cloud'. However, unlike Vietnamese naming, English names exhibit greater flexibility in gender associations. While VPNS maintain strict semantic gender markers, reinforced by elements like *Thị* in female names and compound names (Nguyen 2010), Anglophone naming trends have shifted toward increased gender neutrality. Names such as *Jordan* and *Taylor*, which accounted for 0.50% of combined US births in 2006 (SSA 2006), contrast with Vietnamese unisex names like *Linh* and *Thanh* (10–15% in 2006), which still carry subtle gendered connotations. Ultimately, both naming systems encode gendered ideals, yet they do so through distinct linguistic mechanisms: phonological in English and semantic in Vietnamese. These differences highlight cultural variations in how societies articulate gender identities through names, shaping perceptions of masculinity and femininity across linguistic traditions.

Both Vietnamese and many Anglophone societies historically operated within patriarchal structures, where women were excluded from political life and men held social authority (Lakoff & Bucholtz 2004; Cameron 1985). Up to the early 21st century, as Viet Nam integrated into the global landscape post-1986, patriarchal traditions continued to shape naming conventions. Male names, such as *Vương* 'king' in Vietnamese and *George* associated with 'royalty' in Anglophone traditions, conveyed leadership. In contrast, female names like *Duyên* evoked delicacy or virtue, traits culturally gendered in Viet Nam (e.g., 'deep blue' symbolizing feminine beauty and 'morality' representing masculine virtue, as discussed in section 3). This contrasts with Anglophone names like *George* and *Grace*, where meanings are less rigidly tied to gender. By 2006, reflecting Viet Nam's post-1986 era of integration, unisex names such as *Linh* or *Thanh* (10–15%, section 3.5) emerged alongside markers like *Thị* (65.93% of females, Nguyen 2010), paralleling Anglophone shifts like *Jordan* or *Taylor* (Barry & Harper 1993), blending individuality with persistent gender distinctions evident in English phonological patterns (Cutler et al. 1990). This comparison, while brief, highlights shared gender dynamics adapted to distinct cultural and linguistic contexts up to the early 21st century, with the 2006 dataset offering a key snapshot of the evolution of VPNS.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the complex relationship between gender, culture, and identity in Vietnamese naming conventions, demonstrating that names reflect societal norms and gender roles. VPNS typically consist of family, middle, and given names, each with significant cultural meaning. The analysis reveals distinct semantic patterns: male names emphasize strength and leadership, while female names highlight beauty and virtue, reflecting enduring Confucian thinking. Middle names serve as essential gender markers, typically with *Văn* for males and *Thị* for females despite their usage being significantly declined, highlighting the intricacies of gender identification within the naming system. The rise of gender-neutral names signals a societal shift toward individuality and inclusivity. A cross-cultural comparison with English names reveals that both cultures exhibit gender distinctions, rooted in patriarchal structures. Despite progress toward gender equality, historical biases continue to influence naming practices. Ultimately, the findings contribute to the fields of sociolinguistics and cultural studies, emphasizing the importance of personal names as vital indicators of gender roles, cultural identity, and the ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity in Viet Nam.

Notes

¹ In 1986, Vietnam launched *Đổi Mới*, an economic reform policy that shifted the country from a centrally planned economy to a socialist-oriented market economy, promoting privatization, foreign investment, and rapid growth.

² My analysis of the names of Vietnamese Members of Parliament (MPs) in 1946 and 2021 illustrates this shift: in 1946, 51 out of 333 MPs (15.31%) adhered to Model 2, whereas by 2021, only 4 out of 410 MPs (0.95%) followed this traditional structure. These figures highlight a marked departure from this naming convention over time.

³ Before 1945, VPNs were mostly monosyllabic. Le (2005) found only one in 121 women had four-syllable names, and none among 437 men. By 2006, their usage (both sexes) rose to 21.83% in the North, 30.10% in the Midland, and 46.90% in the South (Nguyen 2010).

⁴ Traditionally, the names of 12 animals in the Chinese Vietnamese zodiac, such as *Sửu* 'buffalo', *Ngọ* 'horse', and *Mão* 'cat', have been used as gender-neutral names for both males and females. However, these epicene names have largely fallen out of favor in contemporary naming practices.

⁵ The name *Hương* is one rare exception. According to the 2006 dataset, 210 out of 400,575 male students bear this "female" name (Nguyen 2010). It is unlikely, though, that parents intentionally chose a feminine name for their sons. The name *Hương*, typically feminine, signifies 'fragrance', 'scent', or 'perfume' evoking a 'sweet-smelling' quality. Yet, *Hương* can also refer to a 'village', 'hamlet', or 'place of birth'. Thus, for male children, the name likely carries connotations of a 'spiritual motherland' underscoring that the meanings of names are often shaped by the intentions of the namers.

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