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Youth Dating Culture in Urban Vietnam: Attitudes, Behaviors, and Influences

Alexa DiFiore
SIT Study Abroad

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Youth Dating Culture in Urban Vietnam: Attitudes, Behaviors, and Influences

By Alexa DiFiore

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Abstract

This paper attempts to research urban youth's attitudes and behaviors concerning everything having to do with dating (the process, PDA, typical dating spots and behavior) and opinions towards "hot issues" in contemporary, Vietnam such as pre-marital sex and co-habitation. My research question focuses on what the term "dating" means among youth in urban Vietnam, and the various influences that affect youth's dating and sexual lives. Through an extensive literature review, I learned that there is an overall lack of information and discussion about sex in Vietnam. There is also a general idea that from parents, the government, and school that youth are "not supposed" to have sex.

Through focus groups, interviews, and an anonymous online questionnaire I attempt to discover if youth dating behavior matches the youth attitudes I have read in my literature review. I was surprised to see that the sexual behaviors reported in the online questionnaire differed from those reported in previous articles and in my own interviews. I found some differences regarding the findings of previous research, which are stated in my conclusion, but ultimately agreed with the established idea that sex among youth is "not supposed" to happen. However, there is a constant influx of foreign movies, advertisements, and web pages advocating sex –causing confusion among Vietnamese youth regarding how to fit this new world of sexuality into an old world of tradition.

I ultimately conclude that in order handle various influences from society *and* media, youth must communicate amongst each other. They will be surprised to learn that they share similar sexual attitudes and concern. I also conclude that sex must be talked about and understood in Vietnamese society at large (the government, schools, and parents) to create an open and comfortable atmosphere for youth to learn about sex from trusted sources, rather than relying on foreign websites and friends' experiences.

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List of Abbreviations

- UNICEF: United Nations Children Fun
- UN: United Nations
- HCMC: Ho Chi Minh City
- ISDS: Institute of Social Developmental Studies
- PDA: Public Displays of Affection

DEDICATION

At one point during my fieldwork, I was told that I should direct my research questions to people who knew more because my interviewees believed they were too young to tell me anything meaningful (this group actually became one of my most vital sources of information). This perfectly demonstrates the point of my paper; Vietnamese youth make up the majority of the population, yet their opinions and concerns are often neglected. This paper is dedicated to all of the Vietnamese youth who spent hours openly sharing their opinions and beliefs with me about a topic that is generally not supposed to be talked about. Your voices will help other youth see they are not alone in the conflicts and concerns that arise in trying to balance individual desires and opinions with established societal norms. Please continue the discussions that took place in various cafes and restaurants; but instead of using me as a mediator, talk amongst each other.

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I. Introduction

More than half of Vietnam's population is under the age of 25 (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2010), yet this is the age group that is most neglected and misunderstood. Urban Vietnamese youth have to constantly adjust to a new, modern lifestyle, while also adhering to traditional values encouraged by family, school, and the government. Constant shifting of social values and expectations causes natural human social interactions to become difficult and confusing, *especially* romantic relationships.

This study aims to explore the attitudes of youth in urban Vietnam towards everything having to do with dating (the process, expected boy/girl interactions, desirable traits in significant others, public displays of affection, the club scene, sexual activities, "co-habitation", etc), and how these attitudes are affected by both traditional values and new, foreign influences. This paper uses primary and secondary research to expose the many conflicting discourse and public attitudes about sexuality that creates confusion among youth, intending to create a greater general understanding of the desires and behaviors of the largest age group in Vietnam.

As I began my research, I quickly realized that dating could mean very different things. In prior decades, "dating" did not exist in Vietnam; deciding a spouse was a parental decision rather than an individual one. Today, in Western societies, dating involves any amount of sexual activity (whether kissing or intercourse) outside of an official romantic relationship, and the opportunity to do so with multiple people. In Vietnam's urban societies today, both practices are virtually unheard of and nonexistent. So what does "dating" consist of for youth in contemporary Vietnam? Before addressing youth's current dating attitudes and behaviors, it is important to understand how the history and evolution of expected gender roles in Vietnamese society shaped the Vietnamese dating world throughout the decades.

II. Literature Review

In Vietnam, sexuality is generally not yet an acceptable topic to research unless it is connected to reproductive health issues. Authors Khuat Thu Hong, Le Bach Duong, and Nguyen Ngoc Huong (2009), sociologists from the Institute for Social Development Studies (ISDS), started to break this barrier with their book *Sexuality in Contemporary Vietnam: Easy to Joke About But Hard to Talk About* - one of the first publications to focus on the social construction of sexuality in Vietnam. The authors explain that there is lack of research on sexuality in Vietnam because of the underdevelopment of the social science arena in Vietnam and the idea that sexuality is a private matter not be publically discussed (p. 14-15). The first part of the book gives an overview of sexuality in contemporary Vietnamese society (1945-present) while the second portion presents results from the sociologists' research conducted between 2003 and 2007.

Confucian Ideals

Hong, Duong, and Huong provide an excellent overview of Confucianism that successfully integrates much of information I found from different academic sources on the topic. Therefore, I will use their book to provide a background on Confucianism and examine its affects on modern Vietnam. Vietnam officially adopted Confucianism as the official political doctrine during the Ly Thanh Tong dynasty in the 11th century (p. 40). Confucianism is more than a political ideology; it is a set of ethical teachings that shape the everyday behaviors and attitudes of its followers. The main factor shaping ideal behavior according to Confucianism is gender; the ideal Confucian man “perfected himself through self discipline and social learning” to manage his family, govern his country, and even “conquer the world” while the ideal Confucian woman possessed The Four Virtues in order to serve her family (p. 41). The Four

Virtues consisted of being skillful in household duties, being able to attract one's husband through femininity and grace (while being sure not to be suggestive to other men), having quiet speech that demonstrates a submissive position, and finally, being faithful and obedient of one's elders and husband (p. 43). The submissive role of women is emphasized and valued in Confucianism. A woman must be submissive to a man her whole life, following the Three Submissions/Obedience: her father before she is married, then her husband after marriage, and then her eldest son after her husband dies (p. 42). These teachings were written in rhythmic verses using popular phrases so that women, who were generally illiterate during feudal times, could learn and memorize them (p. 44).

The most important characteristic a woman must possess for her husband, surpassing being faithful and obedient, is preserving her virginity until marriage. Confucian doctrines "emphasize virginity as the single most important standard in evaluating a woman's morality", a belief that still holds true in Vietnam today (p. 35). Men, on the other hand, are allowed to have multiple wives, sex before marriage, and the right to abandon unfaithful wives. These "rules" created a long-lasting double standard that is still present in Vietnam today.

Confucianism also helped to establish the negative view of sex as a "social evil." Sexuality can even threaten national security, as seen in stories about Kings who lost their kingdoms due to infatuation with women (p. 45). A woman's sexuality is considered a source of social evil, *but* being sexual loyalty to one's husbands is an ideal trait. Sexuality for women was not supposed to exist, except for the purpose of conceiving children.

There have been formal moves away from Confucianism, such as the 1946 Constitution of Vietnam declaring men and women as having equal rights and outlawing polygamous marriages, but a large part of Vietnamese culture still values Confucian ideals. For example, the

four virtues are still used as the standard to judge participants in beauty contests (p. 51). I have found through others' research and my own findings that while Confucian teachings for men are rarely mentioned or acknowledged today, teachings concerning women's virtues are emphasized (p. 53). Therefore, men today do not necessarily have to follow the Confucian rules and conventions for men, but many expect women to adhere to Confucian ethics.

Challenges to Traditional Thinking

The realities of modern times are providing and normalizing new ways of thinking, creating the challenge of figuring out how traditional Confucian beliefs can co-exist with the new attitudes, discoveries, and influx of modern information. The first momentous change in the world of marriage, love, and dating in Vietnam was fairly recent; the Law on Marriage and Family in 1959 allowed Vietnamese people to choose their own spouse rather than simply adhere to parental agreements (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 57). Even though Vietnamese people's perspectives of sexuality generally remained the same, such as only legitimizing sexual relations within marriage and reproduction being the primary purpose of sex, this law conceived the concept of dating in Vietnam. Individuals were able to spend time with members of the opposite sex and decide if he or she was suitable as a future spouse.

Even though dating was beginning to surface in Vietnam, the process of dating was no easy task. During the war decades (1945-1975) men had to ask permission from women's parents to "seek to understand each other", and the couple had to gain permission from couple's "organizations" (existing in college, at work, and at residential units) before visiting each other or publically going out as a couple (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 66). Having relationships without permission from parents or "organizations" resulted in public criticism. Parent's

permission was crucial; often times a couple would meet at the girl's home where the boy would be asked many questions, primarily concerning the boy's family background (p. 67). Further, this new emergence of dating did not increase acceptance of premarital sex. The 1946 Constitution outlawed the ritual in which a girl's family assigned her a price on her for marriage, formally associating virginity with economic value, but a woman's virginity was still a prized possession (p. 126). Virginity during the war years was proof of innocence and sacrifice for the revolutionary cause, causing a woman's virginity to become a societal issue (p. 127). Women who lost their virginity before marriage could be publically tried and severely punished (p. 164).

Another crucial time period resulting in overall economic, political, and social changes for Vietnam occurred just after these war years: *Doi Moi* (reform). In the remainder of this section, I will introduce new researchers and explain how *Doi Moi*, increasing globalization and media influence, and the HIV/AIDS discovery in Vietnam have each created challenges and alternatives to traditional thinking and further evolved the Vietnamese dating world.

1) *DOI MOI*

Vietnam declared this new phase of reform at the historic Sixth Congress in 1986 (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 71). The main component of *Doi Moi* was the transition towards “a socialist-oriented market economy”, which essentially combined elements of the former centralized economy with new free-market incentives (p. 72). This shift created a new world of privatization, consumerism, and foreign investment in Vietnam. As a result of this new economy, Vietnam's poverty rate dropped significantly from 58% in 1992 to 28.8% in 2002, the GDP doubled between 1990 and 1999, and there was an annual growth rate of 7% between 2001 and 2005 (p. 72-3).

These fundamental changes affected many aspects of Vietnamese social and family life. With parents spending more time working, children and teenagers had more freedom and money - possibly leading to an increase in premarital sex (Mensh, Clark, & Anh, 2003, p. 250). In addition, increased migration among youth to urban areas for education and employment created opportunities to socialize without family supervision (Trinh, et al., 2009, p. 371). With urbanization came more access to social meeting spaces like cafes, restaurants, karaoke and bars (Kalijee, et al., 2007). This increased consumerist, somewhat independent lifestyle in conjunction with exposure to Western culture through new media resulted in new sexual expectations and expressions.

2) GLOBALIZATION AND MEDIA

Doi Moi enabled access to foreign cultural values and norms that were previously inaccessible. For example, Western advertisements embracing women's sexuality began to appear in urban Vietnam in the late 1990s, and malls and local markets "started selling cosmetic products and foreign clothes that were forbidden or nonexistent just 10 years before" (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 76). New ideas of what is beautiful and sexy caused Vietnamese women, particularly in urban areas, to begin to appreciate and show off their body. Celebrities from other Eastern countries also helped to shape Vietnamese youth's notions of sexual attractiveness. For instance, the explosion of Korean movies on Vietnamese television in the mid-1990s started the trend of keeping up with the Korean "look" among young Vietnamese girls: "many young girls transform their facial features in the likeness of female Korean film characters" (Ngo & Ross, 2008, p. 204).

The influx of foreign movies and books concerning sexuality, a topic that was previously kept under wraps, resulted a new interest in love, sex, and relationship among Vietnamese.

General newspapers started a column on love and relationships, and magazine covers began to feature women in revealing outfits (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 79). In addition, 3D pornography from China has become easily available (despite the pornography ban) and especially popular among university students. 3D pornographic pictures are VND15,000 (75 cents), and 3D films can be bought online for VND50,000-70,000 (\$2.50-3.50), including free glasses that are delivered (Phuong, 2011). This increase of sex in the media contradicted traditional Vietnamese values of sexual restraint and prudishness. Along with new sexual advertisements and media content, the increase of public displays of affection (PDA) contradicted popular cultural beliefs. Young people appeared to readily accept these social changes, while the older generation and the government were more hesitant and nostalgic for traditional values (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 81).

PDA was taken to a new level when a public kissing contest was planned to take place in Hai Phong the day before Valentine's Day this year. The event was shut down because permission was not attained from the local People's Committee and "the event did not suit the customs and culture of Vietnam" ("Public Kissing Contest Shut Down in Hai Phong", 2011). A contest of this nature would probably be ridiculed in most countries, but the comments about the event from vietnamnet.vn (2011) reflect attitudes specific to Vietnam. Such comments (that were translated into English on page of the English article) include: "Vietnam's culture is not like the West, shut down this event right away to avoid unforeseen consequences for society" and "this should be banned to protect our culture." One reader felt that the contest would take away from what love is, which is only "meaningful when it's private and discrete". One angered commenter summarizes the general concern that globalization may result in a loss of true Vietnamese

culture: “Cheap imitation! Where is our Asian ethics? We should adopt only what’s good and right. If we ‘import’ everything then we will lose our heritage and become a jumbled mess.”

Western culture also affected language use regarding sexuality in Vietnam. Before the 1990s, media in Vietnam would use formal words or symbolic phrases when discussing sex. However, in recent years the media began using the word “sex” borrowed directly from English, reflecting a shift towards more direct phrases when discussing sexuality and the heavy effect of globalization (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 33). I also observed that many of the students I interviewed used the English word “sex” in their translation of some of my questions into Vietnamese for their friends who didn’t understand English as well.

3) HIV/AIDS

The changes in Vietnam mentioned above brought sexuality to the publics’ attention, but a large portion of society and the government were still unwilling to talk about the issue. The discovery of HIV/AIDS in Vietnam in the early 1990s finally ignited discussion; the severe consequences of unsafe sexual behavior forced the government and society to talk about sex more directly (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 89). As a result, besides unplanned pregnancies, people had to worry about contracted diseases from unsafe sex. HIV/AIDS created funding opportunities, providing the opportunities for researchers and intervention programs to address sexual health issues (p. 90). While HIV/AIDS triggered discussion that would otherwise not occur regarding sexuality in Vietnam, it also caused the community to discuss “good sexual activities” and “bad sexual activities” (p. 91). The moral aspect associated with HIV/AIDS (sex outside marriage, sex with prostitutes, homosexual sex, premarital sex) caused parents to believe that education on HIV and other sexual issues should not be taught at school or discussed at

home. Unfortunately, this lack of information only results in the unsafe sexual behavior that society was aiming to avoid.

4) ABORTION

Abortion has been legal in Vietnam since 1953, and today single women account for an increasing number of abortion cases in the country (Belanger & Hong, 1999, p. 72). The abortion rate in Vietnam is very high, but there are limited data and varying statistics due to the stigma associated with abortion. Abortion in Vietnam does have a positive aspect: the legality of abortion officially separated sex from reproduction, making it possible to have sex without reproduction in mind or as a result. This was a crucial change in the history of sexuality in Vietnam (Huong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 84). Women are now able to decide their own fate regarding reproduction.

Current Data on Youth's Attitude and Behaviors

Virginity and Premarital Sex

The United Nations (UN) Fact Sheet on Young People and Health in Vietnam in 2011 reports that nearly 10% of married couples age 24 and younger have had premarital sex in Vietnam. This statistic is strikingly different from youth in America, where 95% of people were reported to have pre-marital sex in 2002 and the number is only increasing (Jayson, 2006). In addition, in 2003 Vietnamese boys were found to be less likely to engage in premarital sex than boys in the Philippines and Thailand (Mensch, Clark, & Anh, 2003, p. 253). It should be noted that because sex is a highly sensitive and private topic in Vietnam, sexual behavior is most likely underreported. What causes such stigma against premarital sex in Vietnam?

Stigma against sexual activity before marriage is centered on girls and women in Vietnam. Generally, sexual experience is seen an important aspect of masculinity and gains respect among male peers, so Vietnamese society is tolerant of men's sexual activity before marriage. Many people believe it is natural for men to be sexual, and that sex is necessary for a man to maintain a healthy life (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 115). This also excused extra-marital sex because men are "unable to control their sexual desire and having more sexual experience was a positive proof of manhood" (p. 255). Women, on the other hand, aren't considered to need sex like men and therefore have no excuse to commit adultery or have sex before marriage. Female virginity is considered the highest symbol of a woman's virtue, so tearing the hymen before marriage is a "huge mistake" for a girl (Quach, 2008, p. 154). Women are not supposed to know anything about sex and should follow the man's lead, which relates to why women don't usually discuss contraceptive methods or condoms with sexual partners. Women must be submissive and appropriately respond to sexual advances; "if a woman expressed her strong sexual desires, she would be considered unethical and be seen as lacking virtue" (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, 115). Quach explains that both women and men acknowledge passivity in women as a desirable trait (p. 158). Even in a modern age affected by globalization and increasing equality for women, "women's views of female sexuality are constrained by patriarchal, male dominated cultural notions" (Quach, 2008, p. 152). Women in contemporary Vietnam are struggling to fit contradictory gender expectations.

Authors Do and Fu support Quach's research by demonstrating through their national 2010 survey that there is more acceptance of men having pre-marital sex than women. Men's acceptance of men's premarital sex among 15-24 year olds was 21.3%, whereas men's acceptance of women's premarital sex was only 10.8% (p. 112). During the same year, Martin

found in his research that there is anxiety among Vietnamese men regarding sexual ability due to the belief that Vietnamese women are becoming more sexually experienced (p. 13). Men are worried and upset because of the “unreliability” of physical evidence of women’s virginity due to a hymen-reconstruction surgery (p.12). This surgery is disrupting men’s traditional expectations for women, and subsequently creating a new urgency and desire for men to gain sexual experience.

Even though the reported percentages of youth having sex are low in number, 37% of 15-24 year old in Vietnam “believed that premarital sex is acceptable when both partners consent, when the partners are about to get married, or if they are able to prevent pregnancy” (UN, “Fact Sheet”). Sexual norms are quickly changing among Vietnamese Youth; the age of the first experience of sexual intercourse has “decreased from 19.6 years in 2004 to 18.1 years in 2009”, while the age of first marriage increased between 1999 and 2006 from age 25.3 to 26.6 for men and from age 22.7 to 23.2 for women (UN, “Fact Sheet”). Hong, Duong, and Huong’s (2009) research found that 19.9% of participants aged 15-24 have had sex before marriage, and the authors acknowledge that the number can be higher since Vietnamese people are hesitant to report sexual behavior (p. 153). The rising levels of sexual behavior among youth are attracting a lot of attention from policymakers, social researchers, parents, and the general public (Do & Fu, 2010, p. 104).

However, while premarital sex is increasing, it is still not a common activity among VN youth. Despite French and American influences, “it is generally agreed that Confucianism and Buddhism doctrines still represent the most predominant source of informal social control among Vietnamese, which has helped maintain a low prevalence of premarital sexual behaviors” (Do & Fu, 2010, 104). Confucianism maintains the idea that the main goal of one’s life is to reproduce

to preserve the family name, whereas Buddhism does not encourage sex at all and advises people to avoid sex in order to reach Nirvana (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 98). Therefore, despite the significant social changes that occurred in Vietnam in the last half century, sexuality is still largely associated with preserving the race (reproductive purposes) and rarely associated with pleasure.

The majority of research done in Vietnam on sexuality among adolescents perpetuates the stigma of premarital sex through its focus on the health consequences of unsafe and unsanctioned sexual activity, mainly abortion and HIV, rather than the social aspect of sex. Mensh, Clark, and Anh (2003) decided to look beyond the health aspects of sex, and found that, contradictory to the UN report, a high number of married women under the age of 24 reported having premarital sex (p. 249). The women may have been more willing to discuss sexual history once they were married or because their premarital sex was with a future fiancé.

Youths reported in Kaljee, et al.'s 2007 study that relationships involving sex are "bad", whereas "good" relationships are pure and health (meaning no sex). Many of the participants reported a fear of pregnancy, but have limited access to condoms and were therefore reluctant to prepare for sex. Kaljee, et al. found that "significantly more males (20.5%) reported engaging in sexual touching than females (13.8), which is in agreement with the above statistics. In addition, males who reported any sex or sexual touching had less self-efficacy than those who reported none, whereas there was not such a difference for female respondents. This suggests that young women, even when sexual active, are unwilling to accept their own sexuality. Kaljee, et al. concluded, "stigma associated with premarital sexual relations creates for youths an atmosphere of silence". Youth engaged in sexual activity often experience shame and denial of their

sexuality. Urban youth especially have to hide and rush their sexual activity due to limited to no private space, further associating sex with shame (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 212).

Sex Education, or Lack Thereof

The reason why there are so many stories about the negative consequences of sexual activities in Vietnam is because there is lack of access to reliable sex education information for youth, not simply because sex among youth is occurring. The national family planning program in Vietnam provides contraception and reproductive health information to married couples, whereas youth have limited access. About a third of young people in Vietnam have difficulty accessing reproductive health care and counseling services (UNICEF, 2010). Health policies in Vietnam view sexuality among young people as a problem rather than a natural right, so young people are informed about sexual risks and encouraged to practice abstinence (Quach, 2008, p. 159). To conclude my literature review, I will evaluate the four areas in which sex education is discussed, ignored, or minimally talked about, and how this affects Vietnamese youth.

1) FAMILY

As UNICEF stated in its *Analysis of the Situation of Children in Viet Nam* 2010, “the family is the foundation and basic social unit in Viet Nam” (p. 19), therefore family beliefs have a heavy impact of Vietnamese youth. Youths learn attitudes about sex through observing their parents relationship and hearing the “lessons” their parents tell them. However, there are barriers to parent-adolescent sexual communications due to parent’s lack of information, embarrassment from sides, parent’s time constraints, and parent’s fear that discussion will encourage sexual experimentation (Trinh, Steckler, Ngo, & Ratliff, 2009, p. 372). Parents who do discuss sexual issues with their children only warn them of the negative consequences of early sexual

encounters, such as decreased morality, pregnancy and abortion, and HIV/AIDS (p. 374). Most parents advise abstinence and avoidance of serious relationships. These warnings are mainly directed at daughters rather than sons. Parents, mostly mothers, often caution their daughters about sex using negative stories of local girls who had premarital sex, became pregnant and had abortions, and became ostracized. Thus, media accounts became a trigger sexual communication among family. Virginity is not only associated with an individual woman's virtue, but "the honor of her whole extended family" (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 314). For boys, parents focused on the moral aspect of sex, advising their sons not to have premarital sex in order not to harm a girl's reputation if she gets pregnant (because it is acceptable for men to avoid taking responsibility for bad sexual behaviors), and were concerned about how relationships will affect his education.

In summery, parents lack of knowledge about sexual issues and awkwardness about the topic result in simply providing warnings or moral advice about sex rather than discussing the needs, feelings, and desires of their children (Trinh, et al., 2009, p. 378). Vietnamese parents reinforce the social advantage men have by warning their daughters to be careful with their virginity, but excusing sons from being concerned about negative results of irresponsible sex.

2) SCHOOL

Sex education was nonexistent in Vietnam until the early 1990s for two main reasons: it was believed that youths should not be having sex so sex education was therefore unnecessary, and Vietnam was facing problems in previous decades (such as wars and poverty that followed the American War) that pushed the issue of sex to the side (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 308). However, the appearance of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and increase in abortion caused

sexuality to be something that could no longer be ignored, and as a result sex education began to develop.

Sex education was introduced through the frame of reproductive health issues. Today, sexuality is generally only taught from a biological viewpoint, stemming from the Confucian belief that sex for pleasure is disgraceful unless it serves reproductive purposes (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 48). Another reason sex generally is not discussed in school is because teachers do not feel prepared to teach the subject since they themselves were lacking information and were taught that young people should not have sex (p. 323). Therefore, both teachers and students felt uncomfortable when discussing sex education.

The only social aspects of formal sex education involve morality education, which teaches students to “tame” their animal instinct. Morality education is mandated in Vietnam’s school curriculum (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 30). There are extra classes organized specifically for girls to teach them to protect themselves against men’s desires so that “sex would not happen to them” (p. 330). This further perpetuates the negative association with sex among adolescent girls, and reinforces gender roles through signifying that boys do not need to learn about sex or women’s sexuality.

3) PEERS

The topic of sexuality and sex education are generally ignored in school, at home, and in the government. Vietnamese society is largely concerned with girl’s reproductive health specifically, such as virginity and early pregnancy, yet the government, family, and school generally fail in explaining sex to girls – creating confusion and increased unsafe activity (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 309). Therefore, youth have to turn elsewhere for information.

Peers provide comfort and information where the family and school do not. Exchanging knowledge about sexuality forms a sense of brotherhood among males, especially because Vietnamese men have long taken pride in having sexual experience (Hong, Duong, & Hong, 2009, p. 358). However, this mentality also creates peer pressure among those less sexually experienced: peers having premarital sex increase the likelihood of having premarital sex by at least 2.6 times (Le & Blum, 2009, p. 308).

4) THE INTERNET

The Internet has grown rapidly as a means of modern communication since Vietnam was officially connected to the World Wide Web in November of 1997 (Hong, Dong, & Hong, 2009, p. 344). Ngo and Ross (2008) explained that an increasing number of young people are now using the Internet due to a large reduction in the access fee - 3000 VND for one hour, the equivalent of 20 cents (p. 201). Their research revealed that the Internet contributes to the development of young people's sexual identities and practices by being both a source of knowledge and information otherwise unattainable and a space to publicly discuss sexual information (p. 204). The Internet is a new form of sex education; the Ngo and Ross cite a 2005 online survey in which 49% of young respondents used the Internet to obtain sexual information (p. 202). This number has surely increased in the past six years with widening availability of computers and Internet

Ngo and Ross' (2008) study found that some teenagers used online forums to gain dating advice and techniques from their friends – not only reflecting an exposure to Western media, but also a change in Vietnamese society (p. 207). Intimate experiences and identities that are usually considered private and taboo are now being publically discussed. However, even when youth have complete control of the sexual information they are accessing, there is still a gendered use

of the Internet that reflects established gender practices and communications. For example, young women use the Internet significantly less than boys to gain dating advice, demonstrating the idea that boys are supposed to take a more active role in intimate relationships in Vietnamese society (*Ibid*). This is an example of youth integrating new practices with established traditions in the dating world. While some traditional gender norms remain the same, others change: narratives from Ngo and Ross' study indicate a transformation from "traditional" norms to more "modern" norms consisting of international values picked up from first-hand accounts and movies, music, and other media celebrities (p. 210).

Having limited control and government censorship, the Internet granted access to a whole new world of sexual images and information for Vietnamese youth that would otherwise be unknown. With an official ban on pornography and an emphasis on sexual secrecy, Vietnamese people are yearning for more information and discussions on sex. **The highest viewed Wikipedia article written in Vietnamese** is "List of sex positions", ("Sex and Politics Top Vietnamese Curiosity: Wikipedia", 2011). In addition, Google ranked Vietnam as the top country searching the key word "sex" in both 2007 and 2008 (Hong, Duong, & Huong, 2009, p. 353). Sex is highly researched because of the large youth population in Vietnam and the lack of sexual education at school and at home.

III. Methodology

I chose to focus on urban Vietnam because of the many conflicting influences shaping youth's attitude towards sexuality. The cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) are exposed to modern forms of media, through which many young people receive information and

ideas about sex, and are affected by intense urbanization and foreign cultures (mainly those from the West and Korea) more than anywhere else in Vietnam. I based the majority of my research in HCMC because of the many contacts I have there through BELL Club (the English club at the University of Economics) and my homestay sister Hien Le.

My research consisted of individual interviews, focus groups, an anonymous online questionnaire, and literature review. I conducted my initial research in Hanoi for four days, where I was able to gain scholarly opinions on youth dating culture through interviews with an experienced counselor at the Center for Gender and Development and the director for Gender and Development at the Vietnam National University. I was also lucky enough to purchase *Sexuality in Contemporary Vietnam* at the actual ISDS after many unsuccessful searches at bookstores. Yen, the program assistant in Hanoi, also provided me with my first two Vietnamese youth interviews and the contact information of the students in her English class.

The literature review of *Sexuality in Contemporary Vietnam*, along with a number of scholarly and news articles, helped create a solid foundation for the information I collected during interviews and focus groups. I was able to gain a historical background of youth dating and sexual behavior in Vietnam that helped me to better understand interviewees. Scholarly articles were obtained from both American and Vietnamese sources. The literature I reviewed is used as both a background and explanation of my own primary research.

Many semi-structured informal interviews and focus groups were conducted with Vietnamese students when I returned to HCMC. My research focused on heterosexual youth specifically, because homosexuality in Vietnam is a significant issue in itself and would involve a separate research project. Students generally ranged from ages 18-23, with a total of 27 females interviewees and 13 male interviewees. I did not use a tape recorder during interviews; all notes

were recorded on my computer. I first asked interviewees basic information involving their age, year in University, where they were born, and email address for future contact. I also asked for a nickname or alias after explaining that their real names would not be used in my report.

Surprisingly, many did not care if their real name was used (one male student actually wanted his name to be included for publicity) and did not feel the need for a fake name. Participants had fun with this question and either picked a silly name (like Lady Popcorn or Elephant), a Western name (which could be because I am Western or could reflect Western influence on youth, because many Vietnamese youth have a Western name on facebook as well), or couldn't think of a name and let me decide. Only a minority picked Vietnamese names as an alias, however I will use Vietnamese pseudo names in my report.

Interviews were conducted in a comfortable atmosphere, such as a bubble tea restaurant or café, and generally maintained a high-energy feel from participants being eager to tell me the Vietnamese dating and sexual “norms” and their opinions, and me being eager to learn more.

Nobody refused an interview, in fact it was easy to talk to and find participants because students were always interested in this topic and wanted share their opinions. Many were surprised and excited upon discovering that I was conducting a formal study on dating in Vietnam.

Respondents only reported feeling uncomfortable when probed to answer questions about their personal sexual activity (such as how long he/she waited to kiss a significant other). After noticing this in my first focus group, I decided to focus on opinions about dating and sex in interviews and find out more personal information from an anonymous online questionnaire. I am satisfied with this decision because youth generally answered personal questions in the questionnaire and were quite honest with their opinions, perhaps even more so than during interviews.

The online questionnaire I created contained personal questions about sexual behaviors that were not asked during interviews, as well as opinion questions similar to those I asked in interviews. I emailed this questionnaire to all the members of Bell Club, all my interviewees, and students I met briefly at coffee shops and shopping areas in both HCMC and Hanoi. Youth were generally very receptive; I was lucky enough to receive 57 total responses in which respondents generally spanned the ages 18-22. The majority of the respondents were female (36), probably causing skewed results, which is why I distinguish between genders in my discussion of the results. It should also be noted that the questionnaire is in English (except for the introduction which was translated into Vietnamese), limiting respondents to those with high-level English skills and possibly creating a language barrier. I used the information I received from this questionnaire to create my own statistics concerning current youth dating culture, and information from the online open-ended questions and in-person interview responses to discover dating trends and organize my paper by topic.

IV. Results

Participant Demographics and Dating Statistics

As mentioned, a total of 57 completed the online questionnaire and participants were predominantly female (63%) and consisted of the age group 18-22, with two respondents being 23 and two being 24. Many reported attending University of Economics in Ho Chi Minh City, making up 35% of respondents. The predominant grade level among participants was first year university students (35%). 37% reported being from HCMC originally.

Respondents were asked whether they were currently single, in a relationship, married, divorced, or widowed. The majority of respondents, 72%, are single and 26% are in a relationship. One respondent answered other, and none No participants reported being married, divorced, or widowed, and one responded answered “other”. Even though many students are currently single, 74% reported having previous relationships. A quarter of respondents have never had a relationship.

The most commonly reported age for having a first relationship among those who have had relationships was 16 (26%). The second most common response was 18 years old (14.5%), and the third most common response was a tie between 15 (12%) and 20 (12%). The youngest age reported for a relationship was 13, and the oldest reported age was 25 (both only being reported by one participant each). None of the respondents had their first relationship at ages 22 or 23. When asked the length of one’s longest relationship, the most common response by respondents (21%) was one year. Answers ranged from 3 months to one year.

What is dating, and what are current dating practices?

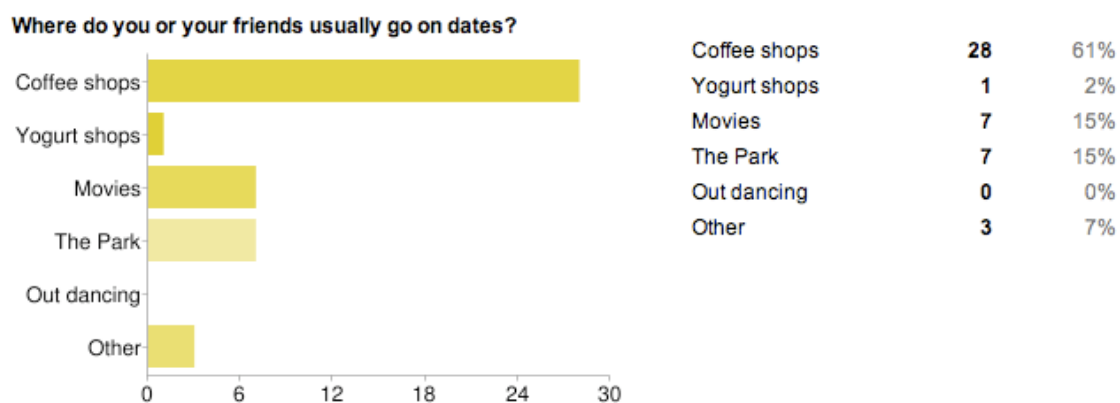
When asked in an open-response question what dating meant to participants, the most common explanation consisted of two people spending time together without anyone else in order to get to know the other person. 7% of respondents defined dating as something between a boy and a girl, dismissing the homosexual population. 11% mentioned dating is to determine whether or not to progress to a relationship. Many respondents defined dating as purposely going somewhere, such as to dinner or a coffee shop. Only 5% of students said that dating includes some type of sexual activity, while more said that a couple must be in a relationship or in love to

be dating. Many of the respondents who were in relationships defined dating as feeling very happy and going to many places.

When youth were asked in a different, open-response question what the most important quality in a significant answer, the most repeated answer was either faithful or loyal (written by 28% of respondents). The second most valued quality in a significant other is honesty, which was the response of 12% of participants. About 9% of respondents valued “understanding” the most, which may be synonymous with being sensitive. However, one 19-year-old female explained an ideal quality is “to fully understand about the boyfriend or girlfriend”, meaning that “understanding” in this case is knowing about and understanding one’s partner.

Participants were also asked where they, or their friends, usually go on dates. They were given a list of choices and asked to choose one. Results of the participants are reported in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Common Dating Places



In order to determine how common PDA was among young Vietnamese couples, participants were asked if they have ever kissed or showed affection in public, or if they ever

would in the future if they have not been in a relationship. The majority, 39%, reported no, but there were generally mixed reactions; 25% reported yes and 28% were not sure.

Sexual Practices Among Youth

The results were about equal when respondents were asked if they have ever kissed anyone romantically before: 49% reported yes and 42% reported no. Of those who reported yes, 28% have had their first kiss at age 18, and 21% of respondents have kissed or re-dated an ex boyfriend or girlfriend. 42% of those who reported yes to ever kissing anyone have kissed someone they were not in a relationship with. Because I was under the impression that kissing someone outside of a relationship rarely happens among Vietnamese youth, I asked respondents who have to describe the situation. Through the responses I found out that many participants considered “kissing” a kiss on the cheek with a friend; about 42% of those who answered yes were referring to a kiss on the cheek. As one respondent explained, it was “not lip-kiss.” The question should have been clearer about what type of kissing was being referred to. Those who understood that kissing in this question meant on the lips explained that they were either dared to in a game, or drunkenly kissed a friend.

. When respondents were asked if they ever participated in sexual touching, 21% reported yes and 32% reported no. However, this question may have been poorly phrased because the majority of respondents (39%) chose the answer “I am not sure what you mean by sexual touching.” Participants were also asked if they have ever given or received oral sex, to which 21% reported yes, 54% reported no, and 18% reported not knowing what oral sex is.

To conclude questions on personal sexual experience, respondents were asked if they have ever had sexual intercourse. Of those who responded, 11% reported yes and 70% reported

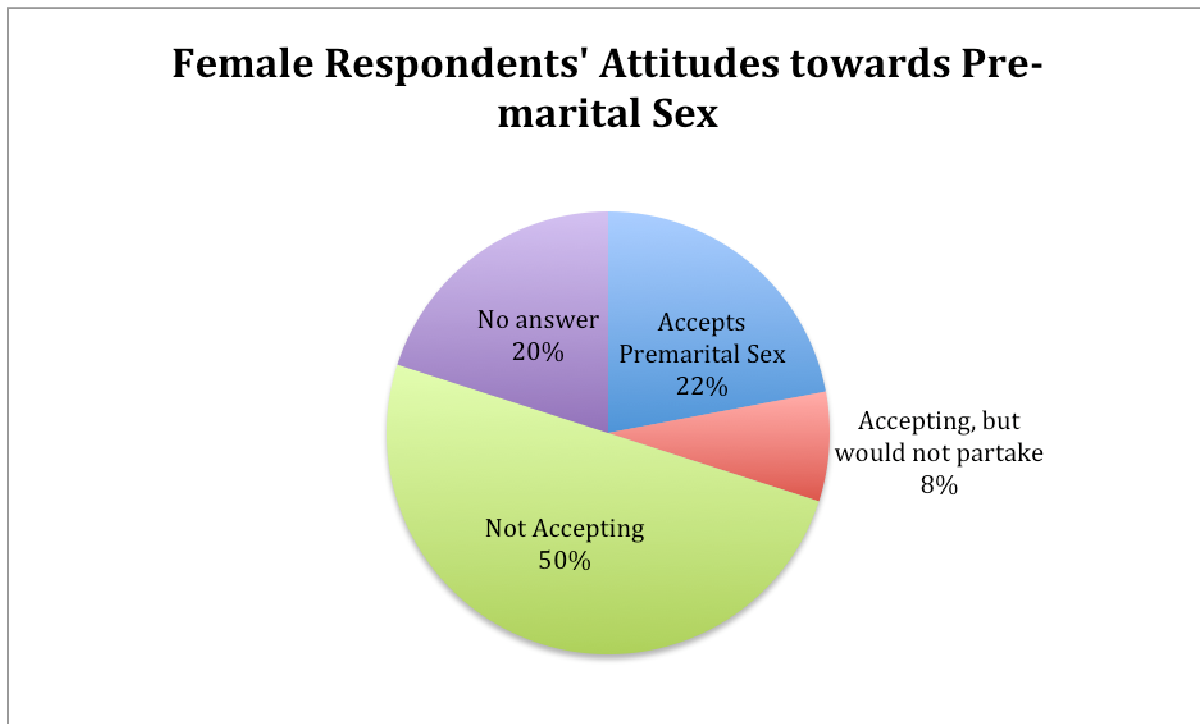
no. Even though the survey was anonymous, 12% of students chose the option that stated, “I’d rather not answer”. Of those who reported yes, 66% were female. When asked if respondents would tell their friends if she or he had sex before marriage, 28% reported yes, 35% reported no, and 30% were not sure.

In an effort to see if going to bars or clubs had an affect on youth’s sexual activity, I asked youth if they have ever been to a bar or club. 19% of respondents have been to a bar or club and have *not* have sex, but 64% of these respondents reported only going a few times. 100% of the respondents who reported having had sex have been to a bar or club.

Open-ended Responses On Pre-Martial Sex

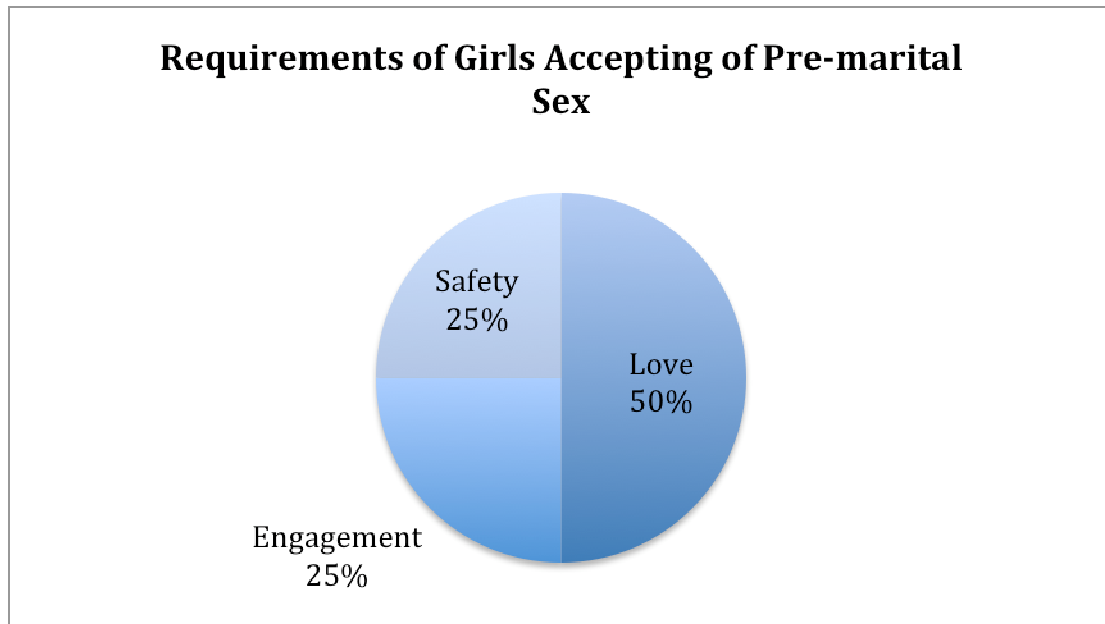
Participants were asked to provide their opinions about sex before marriage and report if they would ever have pre-marital sex. If they would, they were asked to explain under what conditions (if any), and if not, they were asked why. To create a clearer understanding of the results, this data will be analyzed by gender. The results of the female respondents regarding opinions about premarital sex can be seen in Figure 2 on the next page.

Figure 2



The 22% of total female respondents accepting of premarital sex generally required three conditions. Half of these respondents reported love as a condition for premarital sex. However, one female respondent stated that “sex is a part of love” rather than the other way around. Many girls also said that before having sex, a girl should make sure her boyfriend is a good person and right for her. A quarter of the female respondents accepting of premarital sex reported engagement as a prerequisite, and explained that having sex before marriage is important in order to determine sexual compatibility. An alternative quarter of respondents reported that responsibility and safety were necessary for premarital sex. These results can be seen in Figure 3 on the next page.

Figure 3



The 8% of female respondents who were openly accepting of premarital sex, but would never have sex before marriage themselves (as seen in Figure II) reported they would not do so because Vietnamese culture does not allow it. The majority of these respondents were accepting of premarital sex because they believed sex to be a biological, natural human instinct. However, Figure II also demonstrates that 50% of total female respondents were both intolerant of premarital sex. The majority of these respondents acknowledged that pre-marital sex has bad consequences for women in Vietnam. A third of these female students reported that they would never have premarital sex because a woman's virginity is supposed to be for her husband, explaining that that a woman who has sex before marriage will have trouble finding a husband and/or experience negative consequences if her husband finds out after marriage that she is not a virgin. A number of the female respondents reported that they would not have sex before marriage because their culture and family would simply never allow it. About 20% of total female respondents chose to leave this question blank. I assumed that the majority of those who

left the question blank have had sex themselves and therefore did not want to share their opinion about something that is considered taboo, but in fact the majority of those who left the question blank (83%) previously reported that they were virgins.

Male respondents differed from females in that the majority, 52%, accepted and encouraged premarital sex. Of these male respondents, 36% reported responsibility and safe sex as requirements for those who wish to have premarital sex. Regarding reasons why these males would have premarital sex: 18% of respondents explained that sex enhances a relationship, and an alternative 18% believed that sex was a human need that should be fulfilled. Others stated that sex before marriage is the modern thing to do, or they had no problem having premarital sex, but their girlfriend must ultimately decide to or not.

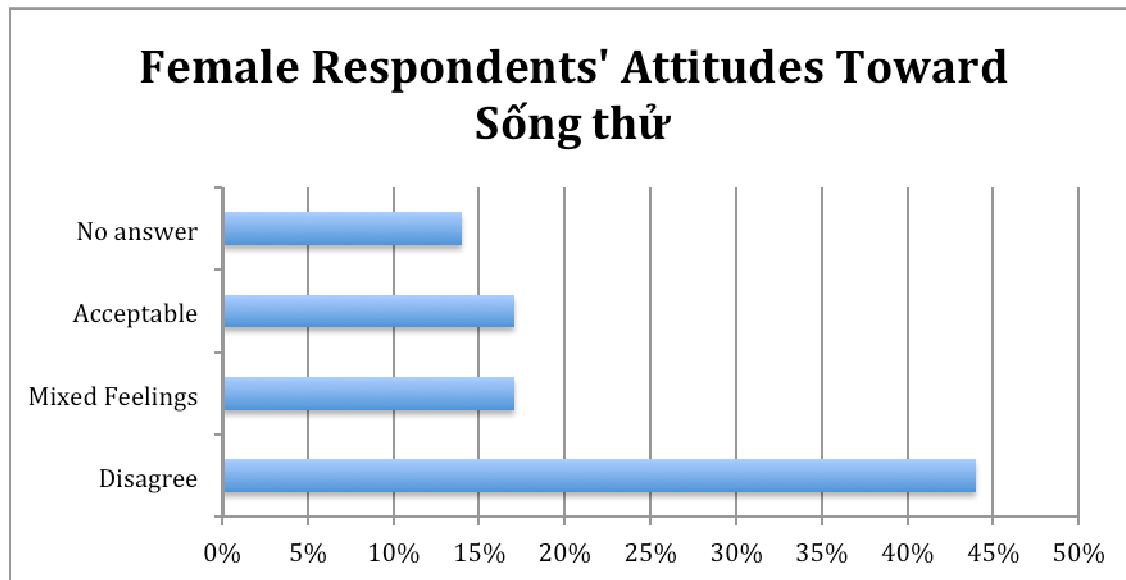
38% of total male respondents did not agree with the act of premarital sex. Similar to women, many of these respondents (63%) cited traditional “rules” as reasons why they would never have premarital sex. These male students forwardly acknowledged the double standard in premarital sex practices and beliefs; many explained that they would not have sex before marriage in their girlfriend’s best interest. About 10% of total male respondents (who are virgins) left this question blank.

Open-ended responses on *Sống thử* (Co-habitation)

The second open-ended response question posed in the questionnaire concerned a topic that many youth have told me is “hot issue” in Vietnam today: *Sống thử*. *Sống thử*, or co-habitation, is the practice of living together before marriage. Many people consider *Sống thử* to be “trial living”. Participants were asked what their opinion was on the issue, and if they would ever do *Sống thử* themselves. I will again separate the responses by gender. The results of female

respondents can be seen in Figure 4 below. It should be noted that percentages do not add up to 100% because some of the respondents answers can not easily be placed in one category (for example, a female student may agree with *Sống thử* but never do it herself).

Figure 4



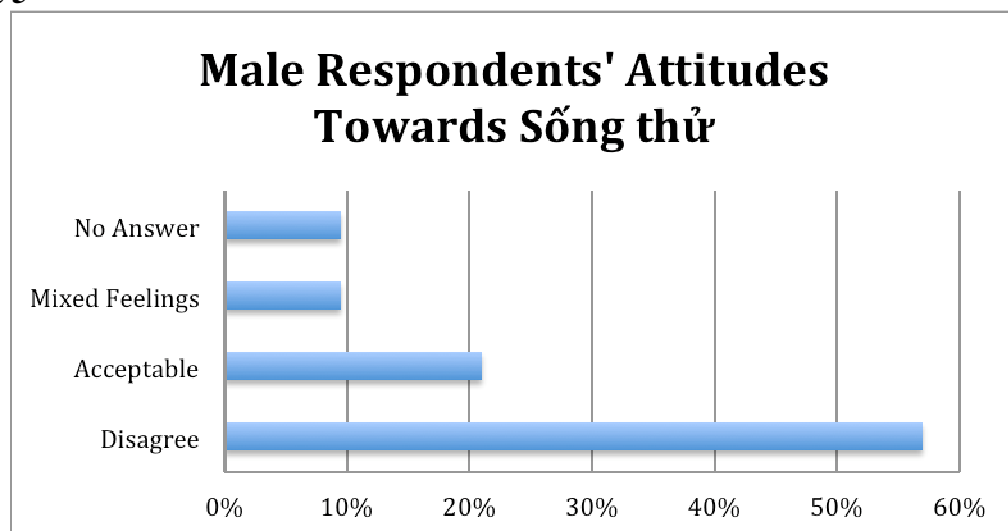
44% of total female respondents were against *Sống thử* for many reasons. The most common response was that women risk a lot by participating in *Sống thử*. They will usually have a bad image in the eyes of family, friends, and strangers. Furthermore, if it does not work out with the current boyfriend, their future husband will not accept them, Another reason women are at a disadvantage concerns unplanned pregnancy; a man can leave the woman to face the situation completely on her own. Therefore, 31% of the female students in this group, which make up about 14% of all female respondents, would not live with a man before marriage because of the risks involved. About 19% of these female respondents against *Sống thử* explained that the practice simply not doable for them because they live in Vietnam; it is considered inappropriate, against tradition, and the root of many problems. Other respondents

explained that there was no need for *Sống thử* if the couple did not intend to marry, while others believed that many students are too young to live together like a married couple.

About 17% of female respondents were accepting of *Sống thử*. Half of this group explained that *Sống thử* was an important test of love in a relationship and a good way to see if one's significant other will be a good marriage partner. Others said *Sống thử* is okay as long as one is willing to accept the consequences, and many said they would wait until they are older and in a serious relationship before trying *Sống thử*.

Many of the female students explained that *Sống thử* is helpful in getting to know each other better and to test married life, but wouldn't do it themselves, at least while they were living in Vietnam. Most respondents listed the advantages (getting to know one's future spouse better) and disadvantages (unplanned pregnancy, ruined reputation) of this practice, and therefore about 17% of total female respondents had mixed opinions about *Sống thử*. There were 14% of total female respondents who did not answer this question. The attitudes of male respondents can be seen in Figure 5 below (these percentages also do not add up to 100% because of the complexity of respondents' answers).

Figure 5



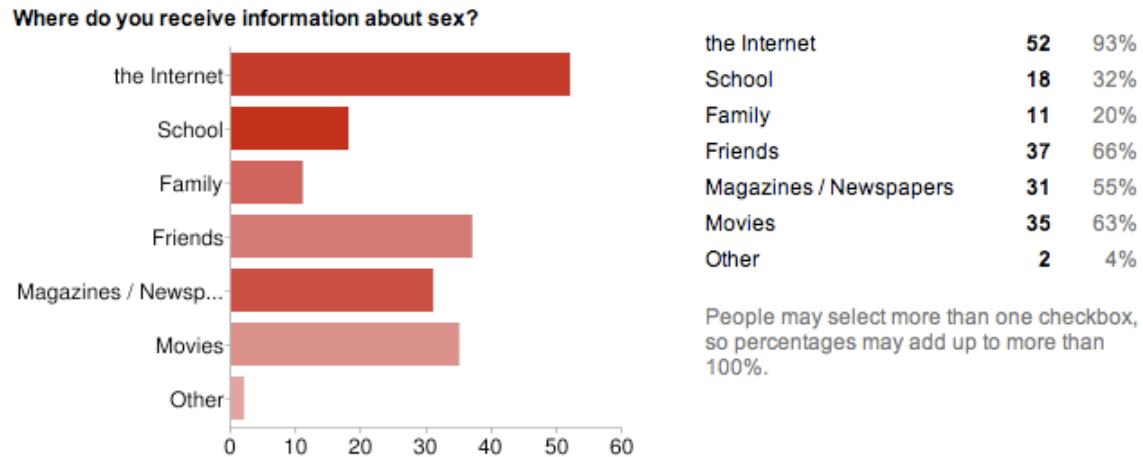
Male respondents were similar to the female students in that the majority (57%) disagreed with *Sống thử* for various explanations. Some didn't want to risk hurting the girl involved, others felt that people who do *Sống thử* were just following sexual desires, some didn't think students were mature enough to handle living together and being independent, and many thought more problems resulted from *Sống thử* than solutions. Male students, again similar to female students, also had mixed opinions about *Sống thử*; 9.5% of male respondents provided both advantages and disadvantages of the practice and were not sure whether they themselves would do *Sống thử*.

There were 21% of male respondents who thought *Sống thử* was an acceptable practice. Half of the people in this group explained that *Sống thử* is enjoyable and good for a relationship, and the other half said it is important in helping couples understand each other more before marriage. 9.5% of male students chose not to answer this question.

Influences on Sexual Knowledge and Behavior

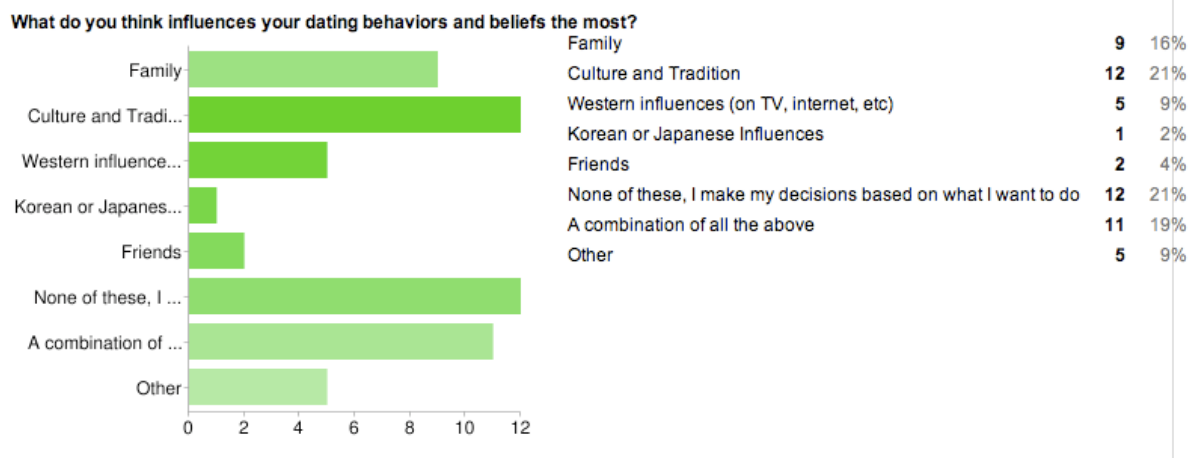
Participants were asked where they receive information about sex. They were given a list of choices and were able to check multiple answers. The majority of youths used the Internet to gain access to information about sex. Results on sources of sexual information can be seen in Figure 6 on the next page.

Figure 6. Where Youth Receive Sexual Information



After answering a series of questions about their dating behavior and beliefs, respondents were asked to decide what influenced their dating practices the most. I provided a list of influences on dating in contemporary Vietnam that I have heard about through interviews or read in my literature review. Results about such influences are displayed below in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Self-Reported Influences on Dating



There was a tie for the largest influence on youth; 21% of students considered culture and tradition to be the largest influence on their dating behavior, while an alternative 21% considered themselves not to be affected by outside influences. The second most popular response was “a combination of all the above”, which 19% of respondents chose. Family also appeared to be influential, which was a choice of 16% of the students. A limitation of this question is the lack of a follow-up question asking what “other” would be if selected, especially because this was a choice for 9% of respondents.

V. Discussion

In this section, I will explain the results from the online questionnaire in conjunction with information obtained from various interviews and focus groups. Sections of this discussion are derived from themed questions I have asked youth who participated in my study. Young people were asked about everything concerning dating, including: what constitutes dating, how modern dating differs from traditional dating, opinions about premarital sex and co-habitation, what foreign influences affect Vietnamese dating, thoughts about Vietnam’s club scene, and where youth find information about sex and dating. It should be noted that there are exceptions to conclusions made in this section; this data only reflects a portion of urban Vietnamese youth’s general attitudes and perceptions about dating. In addition, in this section pseudo names are used, except for professionals and scholars, in order to protect the identity of participants and easily refer to the many different interviewees.

What is dating in Urban Vietnam?

I gathered from interviewees and survey responses that dating involves purposely going somewhere to get to know a person better, which is similar to dating in America. Popular dating spots in urban Vietnam are coffee shops, restaurants, bubble teashops, the park, and the cinema. However, some youth explained that the park is not a good place for couples to go at night because of the darkness, which can insinuate sexual activity. Two young people, in separate interviews, said that they see a lot of “movies” at the park (referring to sexual activity). The park is also dangerous at night because it becomes a place for drug use.

The Process

Many of the youth I interviewed explained that most couples are generally friends first. When two people begin to like each other as more than just friends, they decide to go spend time together away from the friend group. This is sometimes a long process, as Tran (20 years old) explained “When you meet the guy for the first time you have a date with him in the US, but in Vietnam you need to know him for a long period of time, maybe 1 or 2 months, before officially dating” (Interview # 6, personal communication, May 6, 2011). Interviewees also implied that the common dating process in Vietnam is indirect; there is usually a lot of texting before one officially asks the other on a date, and boys usually ask a friend of the girl they like if she has a boyfriend before actively pursuing her. Some youth also explained that a boy may buy gifts for a girl on a special occasion, such as Women’s Day or another holiday, and when the girl accepts the gift, she accepts his “love”. I noticed that the word love was commonly mentioned when discussing dating; dating was usually described as a process to find love or to formalize love that already exists.

I discovered a few common trends in the dating process among urban Vietnamese youth. For example, boys generally ask girls on dates, stemming from “Vietnamese culture [in which] girls should be shy and not showing her feeling... active girls are criticized in the old culture” (Focus Group #8, personal communication, May 11, 2011). However, this is changing as current youth magazines encourage girls to make the first move, and some of the girls I interviewed reported asking their current boyfriends on dates before he had a chance to ask them. Another general expectation for boys is that they have to pay for everything, although many girls told me they would rather split costs or even pay themselves. Other common dating behaviors are further explained through the discussion of two common dating “rules” below.

Rule 1: “In Vietnam, we don’t kiss before we are boyfriend/girlfriend”

The above quote is from a 20-year-old man from Ho Chi Minh City and is a common belief among Vietnamese youth. Phung, a 19-year-old girl, believed that, ““a kiss is just for a person you have feeling with. Some do if they can’t help it, but its bad,” (Focus Group # 4, personal communication, May 8, 2011). There are, of course, variations to this rule: one 22-year-old man told me that he once held hands and kissed on a first date, but with his current girlfriend he didn’t do either for five years (Focus Group #1, personal communication, May 4, 2011). Almost all interviewees also said that they would never kiss someone they met for the first time at a club, unless they were drunk and by accidently kissed a friend romantically. Li, a 25-year-old woman from Hanoi, told me that in Vietnam “You can kiss a person you know, but not strangers. When I got drunk and kissed my friend he texted if I was ok, but after that there was nothing. We stopped talking because he thought I was easy,” (Interview #3, personal communication, April 24, 2011). This “rule” eliminates many dating practices that are common

in the United States, such as “hooking up” (kissing or having sexual activity outside a relationship) and “friends with benefits” (conducting sexual activities with friends but not advancing the relationship). In addition, couples can go on “breaks” and date other people (due to long distances or other conflicts), but this generally doesn’t happen in Vietnam where romantic relationships are more serious and defined. Vietnamese youth watch many American movies, but are confused by these dating practices. Those who try to apply these Western concepts to their own life in Vietnam often face criticism and questions. It should be noted that I am in no way advocating Western dating practices, but rather explaining the complications that arise from the heavy influence of American culture (which directly contradicts many traditional Vietnamese practices and beliefs) on Vietnamese youth.

Rule 2: Dating is exclusive

One 19-year-old girl stated “In Vietnam, when two people are dating it means they are boyfriend and girlfriend” (Focus Group # 4, personal communication, May 7, 2011). Of course there are exceptions to this rule as well, but the exception apply more to boys than girls. For example, Hoa reported during Focus Group # 5: “if you are a girl dating with a lot of boys, they call you a bad word. But there are no words for boys [who do this]. It is more acceptable for boys, and that’s stupid,” (personal communication, May 8, 2011). Many of the young men I interviewed thought dating multiple people was normal and important for finding the most suitable significant other. Pham even compared dating to ice cream, saying “there are so many different flavors and you have to try a lot before you decide which one is best” (Focus Group #8, personal communication, May 11, 2011). However, it should be kept in mind that dating in this context does not involve kissing (as discussed above). Only those “affected by overseas culture

do that, but real Vietnamese people never do” (Thu, personal communication, May 9, 2011). I received a similar response from Dat, who said that those who date a lot of people” think like Western people, but this is a small portion of people in Vietnam” (Focus Group # 1, personal communication, May 3, 2011). When asked what makes these people think like Westerners, he responded that many are obsessed with Western movies. These people “don’t think love is important, they want lots of experience. They need special feelings, not love.” At the end of many focus groups, students asked me why Western movies contain characters that have sex immediately after meeting each other. Questions of this nature that I received at the end of interviews and focus group helped me to view dating culture in my *own* country from an outsider’s perspective, allowing me to be less biased when analyzing another culture.

Modern Vs. Traditional Dating in Vietnam

As mentioned in my literature review, dating did not exist in Vietnam a few decades ago. Thu validated this notion by stating, “there was no dating in the past, your parents ask you to marry ta man. Maybe the first time you meet him is on the wedding day, so you try to love after marriage” (Focus Group #7, personal communication, May 9, 2011). Now, love and personal choice heavily influences dating in urban Vietnam. Today, dating is possible without parents’ permission, as I learned from many young women who told me they hide their relationships from their parents. Hai (18-years-old) thought “nowadays when people date they usually hide their boyfriend or girlfriend because they don’t want to bother parents, its hard to get permission. When [youth] introduce boyfriend or girlfriend to mom or dad, that means they want to get married” (Focus Group # 4, personal communication, May 7, 2011). However, this is certainly not the case in rural areas, as Pham explained: “In cities like HCMC and Hanoi, [youth are] more

affected by Western culture, but rural areas are affected by tradition and [youth] don't date without the permission of parents. In very old villages, it is still believed that a boy and girl shouldn't touch before marriage," (personal communication, May 11, 2011). This traditional idea is consistently challenged by urban youth through an increase in PDA.

PDA Among Urban Vietnamese Youth

As previously mentioned, Confucianism has a heavy influence on dating attitudes and behavior in Vietnam. According to Confucianism, sexual relations should only happen after marriage, and men and women are not allowed to be physically close unless they are married. However, when I asked youth the biggest difference between modern dating and dating during their parents' generation, many discussed the increase in PDA; couples today can commonly be seen embracing in parks, coffee shops, and on the street.

However, many of the youth I interviewed reported feeling uncomfortable with the concept of PDA. One 19-year-old young woman explained that this stemmed from their own parents' lack of PDA, as Tra stated: "even common actions for couple, like hugging or kissing, parents don't do in front of children" (Focus Group # 4, personal communication, May 7, 19). Tra later said that it is hard to show love to another person in Vietnam, especially because she feels awkward expressing love to her parents. Some of Tra's peers, on the other hand, were okay with lack of affection. All youth I interviewed considered handholding acceptable, but some explained felt that more than hand-holding (kissing, groping, etc) is very rude and causes others to feel uncomfortable. Excessive PDA also has a negative influence on young children. Therefore, many youth concluded that there should be a happy medium regarding PDA, and were not sure if they would personally partake in PDA themselves.

Generation 9X, or 90s Kids

Li, who was born in 1986, was the first to introduce me to the generation of youth known as “generation 9X”. During our interview, she explained that everyone is weary of those born during the 1990s because they are risky and don’t really think about their behaviors. She told me that she is really open, but “they think differently. In high school I had a lot of friends who had sex, but they knew the consequences. Kids now are *not* afraid of the consequences. I knew I might get pregnant [if I had sex], and was afraid of my parents, but kids now don’t care” (personal communication, April 24, 2011). Thu, also born in the 80s, told me that she thought, “there is a big gap between 90s kids and 80s kids – they [90s] are more selfish and spend more money” (Focus Group # 7, personal communication, May 9, 2011).

I also found that the third and fourth year university students I interviewed who were born in the early 90s themselves thought that high school students and first year university students were even more sexually liberal than they are. Older 90s kids explain that teens are very open and think about sex all the time. Vien, a 21-year-old, thought “young people in high school have it easier to come together, they are affected too much by American culture” (Focus Group #8, personal communication, May 11, 2011). Hoa explained in a separate interview that high school students are more influenced by Western culture because they were exposed to these movies at a younger age. Vietnamese youth appear to have trouble relating to the attitudes and behaviors of those two years younger than them because dating attitudes and behaviors are changing every few years.

Virginity: A Women’s Issue?

Ms. Le Thi Ngoc Bich, a specialist on advising and counseling victims of domestic violence and sex trafficking, made it clear throughout our interview that Vietnamese men prioritize virginity in a wife or girlfriend (Interview # 1, personal communication, April 19, 2011). Ms. Le has many male clients that are worried their girlfriends or wives are not virgins. Some married men even bring their wives to counseling to find out if she is a virgin or not. If a man even suspects that his wife is not a virgins, he continually ask about her about it and tries to make her feel ashamed. Ms. Lee said that some clients who have children ask their wives questions such as “if you weren’t a virgin before you married me, are these my kids or someone else’s?”

The idea of a girlfriend or wife with another man is so repulsing and unforgivable that one man asked his wife who wasn’t a virgin before marriage to find a virgin for him to have sex. The distressed wife called Ms. Le, who told her that if she complied with the husband’s wishes she will not only be committing an illegal act, but the relationship with her husband will be forever changed. Women are familiar with this general attitude of men, and have asked Ms. Le how to become a virgin again due to concerns about their new boyfriends discovering their secret and breaking up with them. Ms. Lee explained that these cases are not popular but they are still happening, these beliefs and attitudes are present in Vietnam today. Cases such as this one are not restricted to Hanoi; Ms. Lee’s clients in Hanoi are not all from Hanoi originally, and some of clients call her from other parts of Vietnam.

Ms. Le further explained that some men with wives who had previous lovers feel entitled to drink excessively and/or have affairs. If the woman confronts her husband about these activities, he will tell her they are due to her faults. In happy marriages, the issue is generally not discussed, *but* if something goes wrong the husband will blame his wife if he knows she had sex

before marriage. In general, wives with previous partners are often blamed for anything that goes wrong in their marriage because of their past.

Young women's current attitudes towards sex are therefore shaped by the idea that there are negative consequences of virginity not being saved for one's husband. However, if a girl loves someone and believes there is nobody else for her, she wants to give him everything she has – her soul *and* her body. Many men ask their girlfriends to have sex with them to prove their love, but women are weary because the man may not marry her after. Both Vietnamese men and women believe (but mostly men) that once a woman loses her virginity, she cannot seriously date anyone else because she already gave so much of herself to another man. In a separate interview with Dr. Le Thi Qui, the Director for Gender and Development in Hanoi, I learned that this belief is so adamant in Vietnam that many women become prostitutes after having sex with a man who does not become their husbands; they believe their situation is hopeless (Interview #2, personal communication, 2011).

Men's virginity, on the other hand, is hardly discussed. In fact, "experience" is encouraged and rewarded among male peers (as demonstrated through my literature review, talking about sexual experience creates a sense of brotherhood among men). During Ms. Le's nine years of counseling, *no* female clients complained about boyfriends or husbands having sex before marriage. Men don't have to save their virginity for anyone, as Pham explained, "guys don't care about virginity, they don't have anything to lose" (Focus Group #8, personal communication, May 11, 2011).

Through my interviews I realized that virginity has largely become a physical issue rather than a moral issue among youth; women must remain virgins in order to bleed when they have sex on their wedding night, demonstrating their virginity to the husband. This stems from

traditional values, but many of the youth I spoke with remain virgins due to fear of traditional values rather than a personal choice to follow traditional customs. I am in no way suggesting that youth should go against tradition and have sex, but instead demonstrating a clear double standard in which men can lose their virginity whenever they choose to, but women cannot. One 18-year-old, along with many of her peers, is very angry about this double standard and stated, “most boys are selfish when dating, if they want sex and you say no, he says you don’t love him. But when they marry, they need virgin wives. I hate boys” (Focus Group #3, personal communication, May 7, 2011). This obsession with virginity affects dating and sexual activity among youth because girls are expected to generally give everything to one boy; therefore she should not have many serious boyfriends and should definitely not have sex before marriage.

Youth Opinions on “*An com truoc keng*”, or Pre-marital Sex

Hong, Duong, and Huong (2009) explained that Vietnamese frequently used the phrase “*an com truoc keng*”, which translates to “eating before the bell” in the decade after the Vietnam War when people lived on collective farms and a bell was rung to commence many activities (p. 162). The authors explained that “eating before the bell” meant getting pregnant before the wedding, which was acceptable as long as marriage followed the pregnancy. However, in my research, respondents told me that the phrase simply meant sex before marriage.

It should be noted that statistics on pre-marital sex in Vietnam, including those from my own research, are usually not accurate. In Ms. Le’s experience as a counselor, the age that Vietnamese people are having sex is much lower than what is reported because youth are having sex before marriage but aren’t open about it because of the stigma.

Why Some Youth Disagree with Pre-marital Sex

1) TRADITION

Many respondents didn't only identify with Vietnamese tradition specifically, but noted Asian tradition and identity as reasons why they were against pre-marital sex. One 20-year-old woman simply stated, "I never do that, its not our culture" while another 22-year-old woman who had pre-marital sex acknowledged that she knew "participating in pre-marital sex is not good for a girl, particularly in Asian culture. We can not control that" (online questionnaire responses, 2011). These instilled traditions and beliefs derive from the Confucian ideal that women must remain virgins until marriage.

2) FAMILY INFLUENCES AND SOCIETAL OPINIONS

A 21-year-old female student at the University of Economics reported on my online: "I think sex before marriage is not a bad thing but my family and the others always say it is not good... They say the girl can lose something or all her life if she has sex before marriage. That's unfair." Families often relay the idea that women who have sex before marriage have more to lose than men; for example, there are many stories of men refusing the responsibility of unplanned pregnancies, and women are forced to take care of the baby themselves. An example of the many negative consequences young women associate with sex can be seen in the quote from Tran below:

"When I got to University, my mind changed because I need to follow the new trend... if you love someone in a period of time you cannot resist your temptation and that [sex] just happens. How can you control your feelings at that time? But my mom influences me more, advising 'you can have sex before marriage but be careful because you are the one who loses more than the man. Like you can get pregnant if you don't have safe sex, and

you are the girl so you are more sensitive, if the man leaves you with the big one [pregnant] how can you stand on your feet again? And be careful of STDs.’ (Interview #6, personal communication, May 6, 2011)

Chieu, a 21-year-old living in Ho Chi Minh City, explained that her family uses negative stories of women who had sex before marriage to as a warning to other girls in the family. Chiu has an aunt who had sex at the age of 18, and now the whole family looks down at her. When I asked how the family discovered she was no longer a virgin, Chiu replied that the family knew her aunt had a boyfriend, and she did not deny having sex when members of the family questioned her about it. Now, “people in the family use her as a lesson to teach other girls how not to act, I’m sick of hearing these stories...she had the freedom to live however she wants, but can’t stop people from criticizing her” (Focus Group #8, personal communication, May 11, 2011). There were no negative consequences as a result of pre-marital sex in this story; the only criticism had to do with Chiu’s aunt’s boyfriend being poor. However, once Chiu’s aunt became known for having pre-marital sex, she became discriminated against in the family.

3) FEAR OF FUTURE HUSBAND

Many young women I interviewed are afraid to engage in pre-marital sex because finding another husband will be very difficult if they do not marry the person they lost their virginity to. Tran even told me “you can be hurt or beat by your husband when he discovers you are not a virgin anymore... family happiness can’t exist if your husband knows your secret” (Interview #6, personal communication, May 6, 2011). At least three different young women mentioned reading stories about boys who convinced their girlfriends to have sex, but disapproved of her once they were married. Therefore, the idea that sex should only connected to married life is instilled in the

minds of Vietnamese girls from early on, as seen by Hai's statement: "if you want to have sex, just get married then do it" (Focus Group # 4, personal communication, May 7, 2011). This quote is intended for girls, as it has been previously demonstrated that men do not need to remain virgins until marriage.

Some young men I interviewed reinforce this double standard. As one 21-year-old man stated "In Vietnamese culture, when a woman has sex before she gets married... she is not a good woman... if she is not a virgin she should tell me before marriage, it depends on the situation of why she lost it" (Focus Group # 7, personal communication, May 9, 2011). His friend, Phuoc, who was also in the focus group agreed that he might be accepting of his future wife not being a virgin if she gave him a "good reason" for losing her virginity. Thu (the only girl in this focus group) asked what constituted a good reason or excuse for a woman losing her virginity, to which Phuoc answered "an accident when exercising." He was referring to accidentally tearing the hymen through an activity that is not sexual intercourse.

Another group of young men I interviewed were angered and concerned about the double standard regarding virginity. One twenty-year-old male student at the University of Economics wrote on my anonymous online questionnaire that:

"it's [pre-marital sex] totally fine. The traditional Vietnamese gentlemen always prefer a virgin. Why ? Because they're conservative, cocky, arrogant and possessive. They want their ladies to completely belong to them and be theirs... maybe, the most important thing the ladies desire is making decisions about their own lives. They can do whatever they want like sex and enjoying the ecstasy. So not only is this my opinion, it's a equal right for ladies."

This student later went on to report that he would never participate in pre-marital sex because he is homosexual. This man's sexual orientation may be the root of his anger towards Vietnamese men because of the stigma associated with homosexuality in Vietnam. However, heterosexual men are also angered about women's subordinate social position in terms of premarital sex. Another male student (age 20) wrote on the questionnaire:

If you have sex with your girlfriend, what would happen if you broke up with her? You're a man so you will receive no harm, but she will remain un-genuine. In other words, she will have to hide that in order to get married. You know, men are selfish. They want to marry a virgin but he also want to try the feelings when having sex in their teenage. In conclusion, if you have sex before marriage, you deserve to be a sinner with this girl.

This student wants the stigma towards pre-marital sex to be equal for men and women. I was surprised to find that some young men who want to have sex before marriage do not do so for the woman's sake. One 19-year-old boy respondent to my online questionnaire reported, "I am a man, i don't want to spoil the lives of any girls at all." Other men reported that they wouldn't care if their wives were virgins or not. However, it is important to note that even if a boy does not care if his girlfriend or wife is not a virgin, his family might. In Vietnam, many generations live under the same roof and young people must listen to the opinions of their parents and elders.

Why Some Youth Accept Pre-Marital Sex, But Would Never Partake

Even youth who are generally open to new practices and want to engage in pre-marital sex would in order not to upset their family, or their possible in-laws. As Pham (a male interviewee) explained, "the sex thing affects not only two people, but also others, like the family" (Focus

Group #8, personal communication, May 11, 2011). Two responses from female students on the online questionnaire exhibited were similar ideas: these two students considered sex a biological need and “not a big deal at all”, but would not participate in pre-marital sex in Vietnam for their own emotional safety. Another young woman stated during Focus Group #8: “we are still impacted from our culture even though we are open-minded. We can’t change other’s thinking, so we have to play on the safe side and wont do it [pre-marital sex]” (personal communication, May 11). Many young women are afraid of judgment and criticism from family and society, and therefore would not participate in pre-marital sex even if they wanted to.

Why Some Youth Accept Pre-Marital Sex

Some of the youth I interviewed who were only accepting of pre-marital sex if it was right before marriage. Engagement ensures a safe relationship, and pre-marital sex was seen as a good “test” for ensuring happiness in marital life. Other youth were accepting of pre-marital sex among non-engaged couples as long as love was involved. One 21-year-old female respondent from my online questionnaire boldly associated sex with love, and not necessarily with marriage life: “If I find the true love of my life . . . I can give him everything without hesitation. I think sex is a part of love, it's important as much as love itself in our life.” Young women who publically separated sex from marriage created shock among others. During one focus group, when Thai said, “I don’t care [about premarital sex], because that doesn’t mean a boyfriend will be a husband,” her friends were surprised and strongly disagreed (Focus Group # 5, personal communication, May 8, 2011). Other youth who were accepting of pre-marital sex explained that it was necessary for the relationship because it enhances understanding and love, while others believed sex to be a natural instinct. Even among the youth I interviewed who advocating pre-

marital sex, it was never acceptable for two people to have sex if they only knew each other for a short time.

Foreign Influences on Pre-marital Sex

Many Vietnamese youth watch American movies that display sexual intercourse as a casual event. Thu stated during Focus Group # 7 that “Easterners are affected because they see Americans do it and think they can do it” (personal communication, May 9, 2011), but its not that easy. Sex is far from casual in Vietnamese society, and therefore these American sexual behaviors cannot be easily transferred to Vietnamese youth. Japanese culture is also influential to Vietnamese youth. A popular craze right now is Japanese Manga, which consists of cartoons in which the characters have graphic sex.

What About Other Sexual Activities?

The stigma against pre-marital sex in Vietnam is clear, but what about other sexual activities such as oral sex or sexual touching? It should be noted that a large portion of interviewees were not sure what I meant by sexual activities besides kissing and sex. However, those who *did* know what I was referring to explained that such sexual activities were okay whereas sex was not “because other people won’t know [about it] and we will pretend we didn’t do it,” (Focus Group #6, personal communication, May 8th). Oral sex and sexual touching seemed to be generally accepted as long as it didn’t lead to sex. Chieu concluded Focus Group #8 but claiming “you can do whatever you want, just protect your virginity!” (personal communication, May 11, 2011).

Youth Opinions on *Sống thử*, or Co-habitation

Many of the youth I interviewed explained that *Sống thử* is when a couple that isn't married lives under the same roof like a married couple. This is a "hot topic" in Vietnam because although co-habitation, or living together before marriage, is common in Western societies, Vietnamese students who do so are received negatively by society. Co-habitation is more common among students who immigrated to cities from rural areas because they didn't live with their parents and therefore have more freedom. Vietnamese youth who live with their parents, on the other hand, have difficulty moving away from family; "if you do that, your neighborhood will think you are a very bad girl" (Focus Group # 7, personal communication, May 9, 2011). It should be noted that most of the youth I interviewed lived with their family.

Many youth acknowledged that co-habitation was a positive practice in that it enabled a couple to understand each other more and test the love in a relationship, but almost all the young people I spoke with explained that this is not an acceptable practice for Vietnamese youth. Two young girls from Ho Chi Minh City reported through my online questionnaire that co-habitation may be a good idea, but they would only try it if they lived in another country. Again, women were seen to suffer more in this situation because of the assumption that couples living in co-habitation are having sex. Therefore, if the couple does not get married, the woman involved will have trouble finding a man who will accept her and is left with a shattered image, while men can exit a life of co-habitation virtually unharmed.

Most Desired Qualities in A Significant Other

An overwhelming majority of youth reported that faithfulness was the most important quality in a boyfriend or girlfriend, while disloyalty (in terms of cheating) was the worst. I found

through interviews that some young men held on to Confucian ideals in that they valued women who are “cute, but not too smart” and “doesn’t think too much” (Focus Group #7, May 9, 2011). Hoa, who was in the same focus group, explained, “there is the opinion that if a girl is naive, innocent, and babyish, the boy will like her more.” However, other young men are moving away from traditional Confucian ideals by generally valuing faithfulness over virginity. One 20-year-old male student even reported through the online questionnaire that he wants a girlfriend who is modern rather than follows “outdated” views, and someone who “dares to break the rules.”

Clubs and Bars Influence on Youth Dating

During our interview, Ms. Le categorized youth who go to clubs into four categories (Interview # 1, personal communication, April 19, 2011). The first group of club-goers is youth who have a lot of money and a family that doesn’t care much about them. Some of the youth I interviewed mentioned this group by explaining that many young people go to the clubs to show off the money they have. The second group consists of youth who are well-educated, open-minded youth with foreign friends (such as many of the SIT Vietnamese student volunteers and homestay siblings). The third are youth who are stressed about work and/or school and go to the club to relax, while the fourth were beautiful girls who go to clubs to find a rich man. Of the youth I interviewed who went to clubs, the majority belonged to the third group.

During interviews, I learned that most students only go to clubs with friends. As Phung told me during Focus Group # 5, “people usually assume that playgirls and boys hang out at the bar. If you go for a friend’s birthday or something it’s ok, but if you go frequently people think you are kind of a player” (personal communication, May 8, 2011). Many other young people explained that bars and clubs are places to relax and release stress with friends, but it can be bad

places because “bad” boys and girls with money go there to do drugs. One 19-year-old boy mentioned during Focus Group # 3 that many “social evils” (drinking, sexual activity, drugs) take place at bars and clubs because the government doesn’t manage them well. He therefore went on to say, “the environment there is quite bad and complicated. You can go there when you are mature enough” (personal communication, May 5, 2011). When asked whether dancing at clubs was acceptable, the majority of youth said it was “totally fine”. However, Tran emphasized “if the boy tries to approach you and wants to touch you by dancing close with you its not okay” (Interview #4, personal communication, 2011).

Many of the students who filled out the online questionnaire and participated in interviews and focus groups reported that they haven’t had the chance to go to a club. This is mainly because many students still live with their parents who are disapproving of the club atmosphere. Parent’s disapproval of clubs and staying out late make it difficult to go to a club or bar any age if one lives with their parents; as demonstrated by a 25 year-old graduate I spoke with had a curfew of 11PM.

VI. Limitations

A main limitation in my research is the population studied; the majority of youth surveyed and interviewed were from the same university and the same city (Ho Chi Minh City), causing results to be less applicable to the entire Vietnamese urban youth population. If I revisit this research in the future, I will be sure to address youth who migrated to urban cities from rural areas. I will also be able to include high school students in my study population; I assumed that

youth of high school age were too young to be sexually active in Vietnam, but the opposite turned out to be true

I would also have liked to make changes in my questionnaire to create less confusion among participants, such as the phrasing of many of the questions involving personal sexual activities. In addition, this report *only* focuses on youth (with the exception of two interviewees with scholars). It would have been interesting to gain the opinions of many of the parents of youth I interviewed. There are many more limitations to this study that I am probably overlooking, but it is important to note that this is not a professional study and I intend to further expand and perfect this research in the future.

VII. Conclusion:

My findings are mainly consistent with previous studies in that attitudes towards premarital sex remain conservative, even if actual behaviors do not fit these “attitudes” (as seen through my online questionnaire and interviews that explored the true attitudes of youth on a deeper level). However, my findings did differ from the findings of Hong, Duong, and Huong concerning sex among Vietnamese youth. The authors (2009) stated “sex wasn’t something associated with emotional bonds or responsibility” (p. 113), whereas the responses I received from many young people was the complete opposite – they generally accepted pre-marital sex only if the couple was responsible, and many would only have sex themselves if they were in love.

Results from my online questionnaire demonstrate that certain sexual behaviors considered unacceptable or something that “never” happens in Vietnam actually *do* occur among youths. Instead of being ignored, these changes in sexual behavior among youth need to be

acknowledged and addressed. Knowledge of youth's attitude and behavior regarding sexuality is essential in order to develop and implement successful reproductive health programs for youth. With increased understanding and acceptance of sexuality in Vietnam among youths, sexual questions and concerns can be adequately addressed and discussed in the future.

I intend to not only inspire discussion among adults and youth, but also among youth's themselves. Many of the women I interviewed said they would never have premarital sex - not necessarily because of personal beliefs, but because of fear of *others* (i.e. future husband, family of both parties). However, most of the young men I interviewed did not care whether their future wives were virgins or not, and many explained that they do not have premarital sex out of respect for women and because of an understanding of the disadvantage women have regarding virginity. I am in no way suggesting that tradition be changed or ignored, but simply reporting valuable information that has been gained through my research. Many young people have similar attitudes and beliefs, but are afraid to act on these desires out of adherence to established tradition. This creates a moral dilemma that would be easier with more open communication about sex.

VIII. Recommendations: Let's Talk About Sex, Baby

With Family

When youth were asked where they received information about sex, the general response was absolutely *not* from parents. "The talk" about sex that takes place between parents and children does not exist in Vietnam. As Pham explained during Focus Group #8: "the only protection from our parents is [being told] not to do it" – a statement to which everyone in the focus group nodded in agreement (personal communication, May 11, 2011). However, whether parents accept it or not, Vietnamese youth are having sex. Youth often look up information about

sex online, which can be incorrect, which is why sexual education for *both* parents and children are necessary; parents should be educated about sex (because they never formally were) in order to relay the information to their children. Youth are more likely to listen to their parents about sexual facts (*not* opinions simply saying no to have sex) than unknown sources.

In School

Even though my background research indicated that sex isn't usually discussed in school, I was surprised to hear from many students that they learn basic information about sex in school. There has been a recent development and advancement in sex education in Vietnam. For example Dr. Le Thi Qui gives lectures about sex at the Vietnam National University in Hanoi and explained that the students really enjoy the lectures and are curious to learn more. However, there is still a moralistic aspect to these lectures – one lecture teaches that sex must originate from love. Dr. Le finds it difficult to give these lectures because many parents are against sex education (Interview #2, personal communication, 4/22).

Tran, a 20-year old student at the University of Economics, stated “in school, when people mention adult issues about sex or how you can give birth to children, the teacher usually avoids the answer” (Interview #6, personal communication, May 6, 2011). Teachers generally try to only use biological terms when discussing sex. However, Tran went on to say that now teachers are more open, and her younger brother has books about the topic with more social information and less biology. She also mentioned having one teacher who was very liberal and told students that Vietnam needs a sexual revolution like Korea or Japan in order to reduce the sorrows for women. Tran also discussed Dance For Life, a project to help prevent HIV/AIDS in which volunteers visit high schools and teach students how to use condoms. Programs such as

Dance For Life are crucial in Vietnam because many young people do not know how to use condoms due to lack of information and stigma; if a young person is carrying around condoms it is not seen as a safety precaution but rather as an intent to partake in “social evils”. Phung explained during Focus Group #6 that “more and more people know about condom use but still think its strange and so western” (personal communication, May 8, 2011). Youth must become more familiar with condoms in order to learn how to protect themselves sexually.

With Friends

Many youth told me that they only discuss sex with close friends because it is a sensitive topic. However, even close friends may not be accepting of sexual activity. One young woman explained in Focus Group #4 that she wants to share her concerns and experiences with her close friends, but they tell her to keep those thoughts to herself. Peers are an important source of information for young people to ask advice about sexual health (such as what the best form of birth control is) and sexual issues (ranging from sexual orientation to pain during intercourse), especially when talking with parents or asking teachers is not an option.

With an influx of sexual information and images coming from foreign movies and the Internet, it is *extremely* important for youth to talk amongst each other in order to distinguish what “common” activities displayed in the media would be acceptable in Vietnamese society. A major problem in Vietnam occurs among youth who copy Western culture, but lack information about safe sex. Tran phrased this issue as “following the trend without a filter” (Interview #4, Personal Communication, May 7, 2011).

Youth attitudes towards sex are constantly changing and evolving - information about urban youth dating and sexual behavior may completely change in a year or less after this very study is published. This is why further research among researchers (especially addressing the limitations of my own research) and constant discussion about sexual practices and attitudes among individuals *and* societal institutions are necessary. Correct sexual information is a key component in addressing misconceptions about what causes social problems feared most by society (such as unplanned pregnancy and HIV/AIDS). These are not necessarily the direct result of pre-marital sex and co-habitation, but rather a consequence of the lack of information and community discussion about sex in Vietnam.

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Interviews

Interview # 1. Ms. Le Thi Ngoc Bich, 19 April 2011. Center for Gender and Development. Hanoi, Vietnam.

Interview # 2. Dr. Le Thi Qui. 22 April 2011. Center for Gender and Development. Hanoi, Vietnam.

Interview # 4. “Li”. 24 April 2011. Hanoi, Vietnam.

Interview # 5. “Tien” 28 April 2011. Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Interview # 6. “Tran” 6 May 2011. Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Focus Groups

Focus Group # 1. 3 May 2011. Two 20-year-old male students from University of Economics. Ho Chi Minh City.

Focus Group # 2. 4 May 2011. Six students, ages 22-23 from various universities. Ho Chi Minh City.

Focus Group # 3. 5 May 2011. Three 19-year-old students from University of Economics, Ho Chi Minh City.

Focus Group # 4. 7 May 2011. Six students, ages 18-19, from various universities. Ho Chi Minh City.

Focus Group # 5. 8 May 2011. Four female students from Hoa Sen University. Ho Chi Minh City.

Focus Group # 6. 6 May 2011. Five 19-year-old students from various universities. Ho Chi Minh City.

Focus Group # 7. 9 May 2011. Three students, ages 22-23 from various universities. Ho Chi Minh City.

Appendix

Link to online questionnaire:

https://spreadsheets0.google.com/viewform?hl=en_US&hl=en_US&formkey=dFBWY0tBTk13XzZoMGc3Xy12NVpIdnc6MQ#gid=0