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### 'Too shy to talk about this topic': The impacts of gender conceptions on the embodied sexual experiences and perceptions of urban Vietnamese students in Ho Chi Minh City

Lily Kafka  
*SIT Study Abroad*

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**'Too shy to talk about this topic':**

**The impacts of gender conceptions on the embodied sexual experiences and perceptions of  
urban Vietnamese students in Ho Chi Minh City**

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School for International Training (SIT)

Vietnam: Culture, Social Change, and Development

Independent Study Project

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to articulate how ‘traditional’ gender roles are resisted, conformed to, and changed among youth within the context of Vietnam’s emerging market economy and consumer culture. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of how gender conceptions have progressed throughout Vietnamese history was a significant portion of my research. The data collection consisted of qualitative data through online surveys and in-depth interviews to understand the impacts of Vietnamese gender conceptions on the embodied sexual experiences and perceptions of university students in Ho Chi Minh City. My findings suggest that contemporary Vietnamese youth, specifically students residing in Ho Chi Minh City, are enmeshed in a web of both market and familial pressures, drastically impacting their sex perceptions and experiences. The way that students are impacted by these changes are directly correlated to gender conceptions, of which produce distinct experiences and sometimes, negative sexual health outcomes. It becomes increasingly clear that in order to address issues such as high abortion rates, early pregnancies, sexual assault, and rape, the state must implement policies that listen to the lived experiences, desires, and frustrations of Vietnamese youth.

## INTRODUCTION

‘In Vietnam, it’s too shy to talk about this topic.’

Sitting in the dimly lit, humid classroom, I scribbled this phrase uttered by a 20 year old University student in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Leafing through my notebook of interview responses, the word ‘shy’ easily discerned itself amongst the cascade of monologues and anecdotes. Right on its heels, however, was the phrase ‘open-minded.’ The research that I’ve conducted has become a testament to the inextricable tie and dynamic relationship between ‘shy’ and ‘open-minded’ when understanding sex perceptions among Vietnamese youth. The intention of my paper, as elicited in the title, is to understand how contemporary gender

conceptions in Vietnam (as diverse as they are), influence and shape the sexual experiences and sex perceptions of university students living in Ho Chi Minh City. However, in order to address contemporary sex experiences among students, it is crucial to understand the evolution of gender conceptions throughout Vietnam’s unique history. This is why my paper begins with an exploration of how gender development is conceptualized and experienced in the context of Vietnamese history. Specifically, I aim to articulate how ‘traditional’ gender roles are resisted, conformed to, and changed within the context of Vietnam’s emerging market economy and consumer culture.

It is important to note that the term ‘traditional’ has become a buzz word in American culture, often diluting foreign histories into a simple ‘before.’ Namely, ‘before’ Western influence and the rapid spread of globalization and toxic capitalism. ‘Before’ emphasizes Western development as being ‘modern,’ ‘correct,’ and dangerously, the ‘only’ future within development discourse. In this paper, I attempt to be accountable in my positionality as an American abroad student by stripping the word ‘traditional’ from its Western cloak of looseness, and giving complexity and description to such a nuanced topic. Furthermore, I hope to dismantle the linear nature of contemporary development discourse by exploring the prominent and cyclical impact of Vietnamese history and culture onto the webs of meaning that consumer youth are creating and recreating.

The work of Western scholars who have studied sex, sexuality, and gender development in Vietnam prior to my research are biased by Western associations of masculinity, femininity, and gender equality. The suggestions of many Western scholars doing research in Vietnam perpetuate colonial mindsets, inadvertently superiorizing Western associations of gender equality and feminism into a cultural context of which these concepts may not apply. In other words, one

size does not fit all. The work of such scholars does not exist in a vacuum, either. When Vietnamese women are “represented as the embodiment of Confucian oppression,” there is an emphasis on “Vietnamese backwardness” (Tran 2012). According to Nhung Tuey Tran, “in this context, only the establishment of Western-style modernity in terms of secularity, individualism and democracy could free Vietnamese women from the shackles of tradition” (Tran 2012). Research published in English has massive ripple effects, not only on the Western cultures being validated and affirmed in their own constructions of gender development, but also on the internalization of such accusations among the individuals embodying such research. Vietnam has historically been constructed and reconstructed in American and Western imaginations, being a former colony of the French, and a war enemy of the United States. Symbolically, Vietnam has been an experiment of ideology; communism, socialism, and capitalism. These three powerhouse concepts are frayed and braided together in a process of experimentation and determination, which has led to drastically changing socioeconomic structures in Vietnam.

Heading into the literature review for this paper requires a gender glossary. In other words, I am dedicating this section of the paper to defining key terms used throughout my research for the purposes of reaching a mutual understanding between myself and the reader. Getting clear on language will help us to dissect some buzz words that are often misconstrued.

Gender: The cultural meaning attached to a sexed body.

Gender Role: A social role encompassing behaviors and attitudes that are expected and deemed culturally acceptable based on a person’s gender and/or sex.

Gender Conception: How an individual, group, culture, or society perceives and forms ideas about gender.

The gender glossary above was devised in a moment of time, and not created as a cemented understanding of identity and the roles they play in society. Language and definitions are constantly in fluctuation, and these terms are not excluded from that. Rather, consider these definitions as a contextual tool for you, as the reader, to contemplate and hopefully critique my literature review, data collection, and research analysis.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *‘Traditionalism’*

More often than not, ‘traditionalism’ in Vietnam is associated with Confucian doctrine and influence, of which permeated Vietnamese society within the 1,000 years of Chinese domination. The four historical periods in which China dominated Vietnam, referred to as Bắc thuộc, compromise much *but not all* of Vietnamese history. Vietnamese history, prior to Chinese domination, consisted of the first Bang dynasty under the rule of the legendary Hung Kings. These kings originate from Vietnamese mythology, involving the marriage between a dragon and a fairy. Essentially, the Dragon Lord Lạc and the Fairy Âu Cơ gave birth to the eighteen Hung kings. Âu Cơ fled to the mountains, and Lord Lạc fled to the sea, each followed by half of their offspring. The folk belief briefly summarized above allows Vietnamese people to have a shared origin, an essentialized quality of being Vietnamese that is distinct from the amalgamation of domination and colonization protruding from other cultures. The idea of the Vietnamese national identity continues to be explored, especially within the context of Vietnamese women and gender roles. Ancient Vietnam was said to have been matriarchal, with the woman ruling over the clan. The patriarchal system found in Vietnam today was introduced by the Chinese and reinforced ever since. So, while it could be argued that traditional Vietnamese values could be tied to an ancient matriarchal society, prior research on this topic as well as my interviewees in this paper

describe traditionalism as a manifestation of Confucian values that “dominated Vietnamese society from 1075 to 1919” (Rydstrom 2010).

### *Gender Within Confucian Ideology*

Confucian ideology was the dominant cultural ideology in feudal and pre colonial Vietnam, and was prominent in shaping gender conceptions, norms, and roles of the Vietnamese woman. One of the biggest roles allocated to women in a Confucian society and in Confucian ethics is “the foremost principle of chastity, which included not only the defense of virginity before marriage but also absolute faithfulness and devotion toward one’s husband” (Nguyen 2007). This is embodied through the concept of the Three Submissions (*tam tòng*), of which “dictate that a woman first owes obedience to her father, then, after marriage, to her husband, and after her husband’s death, to her oldest son” (Hanh 2009). A ‘good’ woman is always in service and subordinate to a man in the Confucian gender hierarchy. Her morality and value is determined by proof of such devotion. These social obligations were originally constructed in attempts to emphasize the personification of social order, rather than promote ideals of equality (Hanh 2009). It is this concept of social order in particular that is central to the functioning and rationalization of Confucian principles. According to these principles, the root core of the identity of the Vietnamese woman insists upon the virtues of modesty and obedience, which in terms of sex and sexuality, creates a heaping experiential inequality among women and men (Hong 2016). While women in traditional Vietnam were strongly condemned and punished for participating in premarital sex and having an unwanted pregnancy, “polygamy and adultery on the part of men were tolerated and widely accepted” (Nguyen 2007). At the core of enforcing such social expectations was, and is, the Vietnamese family. As commonly stated in Vietnam, “the family is the nucleus of society” (Huong 2014). In a patrilineal kinship system, “women are



expected to be predominantly responsible for providing care and support to their husbands, children, and family members on both sides of their marriages. This role may even include satisfying their husband's sexual needs at the expense of their own" (Hong 2016). Traditional Confucian gender roles, in this way, have a direct correlation to the sex experiences of women prior to French colonization. Furthermore, the relevance of Confucian traditionalism and its role in the construction of contemporary teen sexuality is diversified throughout Vietnam's vastly sweeping structural changes captured in the twentieth century.

### *Gender in French Colonization*

Under the sweeping sociocultural changes present in colonization, Vietnam's Confucian ideologies were challenged and resisted by the French in 1883-1954. Western influence from the French introduced and imposed "notions associated with feminism (chu nghĩa phu nữ), individualism (cá nhân chủ nghĩa), personal freedom (tự do cá nhân) and free marriage," all of which entered the Vietnamese vocabulary, and "inspired Vietnamese writers and intellectuals to address such issues as love, free marriage, suicide, or women's rights and roles in the family and in society" (Nguyen 2007). These ideological introductions were especially influential in urban areas, such as Ho Chi Minh City. At the same time, certain demographics of Vietnamese women realized that "'women's rights', in the Vietnamese context, meant not allowing French industrialists to exploit their less fortunate lower-class sisters" (Tran 2012). In this way, individualist ideals were integrated into Vietnamese society through a lens of Vietnamese national identity and traditional culture. The end of French colonization and transition into socialism marked a definitive set of incentivised gender and class conceptions.

### *Gender Within the Rise of the Communist Party*

The rise of the Communist Party following the defeat of French domination at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 wove Vietnamese society into a new set of cultural and gender ideologies. This period was marked by socialist construction in the North, and the war with the United States in the South (Hanh 2009). One key component of the revolutionary project of the Communist Party of Vietnam during this time was to achieve gender equality and women's liberation (Hong 2016). In particular, the Communist party believed "the pre revolutionary (i.e. prior to 1945) family to be an oppressive Confucian and 'feudal' (phong kien) institution which challenged the building of modern families" (Rydstrom 2010). As a result, on December 28th, 1959, "the Law on Marriage and the Family was passed by the National Assembly" (Rydstrom 2010). This law forbade "parental forced and early marriage, the use of property as a betrothal gift, mistreatment of women, concubinage and wife-beating. Moreover, abuse of daughters-in-law, adopted children, and stepchildren was explicitly prohibited. Women had the right to own property before and after marriage. A special section was dedicated to women's rights to obtain divorce and the protection of children" (Rydstrom 2010). The incentivisation of gender equality by the communist Party was motivated by Marxist and Leninist ideology, but also by the needs of the state at a time plagued by civil unrest. State support of gender equality resulted in shifting definitions of women's responsibility in both the private and public sphere, of which ultimately reinforced national sentiment. For example, "Men were responsible for protecting the country, while women maintained production and provided assistance to the soldiers. All were encouraged to contribute their efforts to the construction and defense of the nation. Individualism and romance were criticized, and working and fighting were praised" (Hanh 2009). Even though the Communist party outwardly resisted Confucian gender roles, chastity and faithfulness

continued to be regarded as an essential way of wives to maintain family honor (Hanh 2009). This was especially true in the context of war, when women were expected to represent their families while their husbands went to fight for a national cause. So, while women faced similar messages regarding their role in supporting and sacrificing for their families, they were also expected to conform to a whole new set of gendered ideals: specifically to be “faithful, heroic, and resourceful” (Hanh 2009). In this way, gender equality during socialism differed significantly from the definitions introduced by the French in years prior. Individual freedoms were considered negligible compared to the state incentives and national agendas at the time, which produced its own set of varying gender roles. These state incentives became apparent in youth demographics as well. Not dissimilar to the way in which women were integrated into the national discourse of reorganization and change, “youth in socialist Vietnam were celebrated by the political leaders for their role as 'nation builders' and as the vanguard for the socialist revolution” (Nguyen 2007). Youth under the influence of the Communist party were socialized to understand their identity as an integral part of the success of their nation in obtaining independence. This conception of adolescence, however, underwent drastic changes during the economic reforms of the 1980's.

#### *Gender and Youth since Doi Moi*

The economic liberalization occurring in 1986, commonly referred to as Doi Moi, produced a cascade of social changes within Vietnam, particularly the way in which gender is conceptualized. The economic reforms were a response to many crises facing Vietnam at the time: trade embargoes, mass poverty, a 700% rise in inflation, pressures from intellectuals and southern liberals, and limited funds after becoming involved in several wars. It is important to note that Ho Chi Minh City experienced these reforms in a significantly different way than urban

areas in the North, such as Hanoi. This is due to the varying socio political realities existing in these respective places prior to the reforms. Ho Chi Minh City, for example, experienced the largest economic boom following the implementation of the Doi Moi reforms, due to its pre-existing acceptance of small private enterprises (Freedman 1996). One of the goals of the Doi Moi reforms was to create an economic environment conducive to foreign direct investment. In fact, the four years following Doi Moi’s privatization and opening of the market saw the doubling of international trade. Opening up Vietnam’s markets to foreign trade and influence had subsequent snowball effects on economic, social, and political life in Ho Chi Minh City.

In order to understand how contemporary youth sexuality has been constructed and embodied, I will first explore changing gender conceptions since the economic liberalization of 1986. For women, withdrawing from the state sector meant that they now had the opportunity to participate in “shopfront capitalism - household businesses typically operating with a storefront on the street, comprising retail shops, textile/tailor shops, and food processing units,” that were conducive to women’s new entrepreneurial positions within society (Martin 2013). Even within these new contributions to society and increased visibility in the public sphere, the status of women in the household remained fixed. So, while it was becoming increasingly normalized for women to seek a successful career, they faced a double burden of these new economic pressures as well as pre-existing domestic pressures. Interestingly enough, men and their concepts of masculinity changed in accordance with women’s visibility in the economic sector. As argued by Philip Martin in a case study with young urban men, “they appeared to believe that their mothers’ changing experiences of social and economic mobility – increasing responsibilities in their families and exposure to risk during the early years of Đổi mới – had challenged ‘Vietnamese traditions’ of ideal, masculinist gender hierarchies in the household” (Martin 2013).

The fear that women's changing roles in the public sector would lead to a disruption of the family unit led the state to distribute the image of the Happy Family in the late 1980's. The stated goal of this image was to "produce a modern and morally wholesome citizenry" (Huong 2014). The Happy Family campaign refocused society into a gender distinction symbolized by a family ideal. In this way, although "women continued to be valued as workers in the public sphere, state and media focused on family quality increasingly emphasized feminine domestic responsibilities," including "the material tasks of managing budgets and maintaining the physical environment of the home, to the emotional labor of nurturing children and providing a warm nest to shelter family members from the moral dangers of a competitive market economy" (Leshkowitz 2017). This agenda coincided with the "social evils prevention campaigns which depict phenomena such as pornography, sex work, gambling, drug use, and HIV/AIDS as moral evils and as destabilising threats to family and nation" (Huong 2014). The main culprits of the social evils campaign were victims of HIV/AIDS as well as sex workers. Their bodies, and the stigma these demographics faced, became symbolic of moral degradation. A part of this moral degradation was participating in sexual intimacy outside of marriage. This linkage to and revitalization of Confucian gender expectations emphasized female purity, meanwhile silencing the sexual problems faced by women in and outside of marriage. The social evils campaign did, however, unintentionally give visibility to gay communities. This was because men who have sex with men were the first victims of HIV/AIDS in Vietnam, and homosexuality was not seen as a relevant concern prior to the HIV epidemic in Vietnam (Horton and Rydstrom 2019). This is one example in which the state's commitment towards socialist orientation produces controversies in the embodied experiences of women and queer communities within a market economy.

Within the market economy, Vietnamese conceptions of youth and adolescence changed dramatically amongst rising consumerism and new societal expectations. The word ‘teen’ in Vietnam, was “recently borrowed from English,” and “has no precedent in the Vietnamese language; neither a comparable word nor a comparable concept predated its import from the English language in the late 1990s and early 2000s” (Nguyen 2015). The 1980 Media Law in Vietnam was devised to transition media from a government educational and propaganda tool to a profit-driven endeavor (Ngueyn 2015). Media, according to ninety-four percent of Vietnamese youth, is the “most common source of information for a broad range of issues including love and marriage, gender and sexual relationships, pregnancy, and family planning” (Nguyen 2015). As a result of such a profound tool, Vietnamese youth are able to reconstruct their identities in the context of globalization. That is why, in the wake of Vietnam’s economic liberalization, Teen Viet have begun to understand their age group through a lens of consumption and individuality. This initiation stands in stark contrast to the “ideologically grounded life that existed in previous decades under communism” (Nguyen 2015). Despite this juxtaposition, previous ideologies from communism and confucianism continue to play a major role in the pressures of identity formations that Vietnamese youth experience in contemporary Vietnam. One way in which youth identity construction was changing within a market economy is the example of the body. Under communism, the body is negligible, whereas in a market economy, consideration of the body and how it is expressed is an essential component. For example, “the power of corporations and products to create embodied identities was often exercised through a growing fashion industry,” which then impacted conceptions of femininity and masculinity. Particularly, the mass distribution of pictures of foreign teen stars and Teen Viet wearing trendy clothes after the year 2000 pressured the Vietnamese teen into exercising control over one’s expression as a means of

marketing identity (Nguyen 2015). Aside from fashion choices and consumer culture, the market economy produced a discourse around sex and sexuality that was paradoxical and challenging for youth to engage with, especially in the context of Vietnamese gender conceptions prior to economic liberalisation.

As the construction of Teen Viet identity transformed following market reforms, so too did the popular discourses and growing concerns regarding sex and sexuality. As elaborated on in the previous section, the Doi Moi reforms in 1986 ushered in a new wave of foreign influence, mass media, and consumer culture that many scholars attribute to “increases in sexual permissiveness, STIs, un-intended pregnancy, and abortion among adolescents” (Ghuman 2006). This may be due to the eagerness of Vietnamese youth to “reap the benefits of renovation and to accept new lifestyles with the ‘modern’ norms and values imported from Western culture” (Hanh 2009). In essence, the exposure of Vietnamese youth to Western representations of sex and sexuality present them with a choice that their parents and ancestors never faced: to integrate new perceptions of sex, or to adhere to familial expectations. In reality, much of the current literature on this topic illuminates the complex gray area among these two choices. How youth internalize, resist, and create their conceptions of self and sexuality is a fertile soil of opportunity that is further explored in my research. A common theme underlying many studies conducted in Ho Chi Minh City, and in my own research, indicate that premarital sex and sexual activity has become “a common trend among urban young people” (Nguyen 2007). These studies also suggest that as premarital sex becomes more common, the concept also becomes more accepted and normalized among urban youth. In fact, in Vietnam’s emerging dating culture, it is commonly understood that those in a relationship prove their love through having sex (Bergensfeld 2022). The statistics on such trends of premarital sex, however, is varied and

illusive. One “study, which was based on a survey of adolescents and young adults from six diverse Vietnamese provinces (including Ho Chi Minh City), estimated that by age 22, 29% of unmarried men and 16% of unmarried women have had sex” (Ghuman 2006). On the other hand, the other known study on premarital sex statistics suggests that “among never-married respondents aged 22-25, about 33% of men and 4% of women in urban areas reported ever having had premarital sex” (Ghuman 2006). These two studies showcase vastly different statistics, and yet the ambiguity presented in this data reflects an intriguing disparity between the way in which urban men and women discuss their embodied sexual experiences. This is elaborated on by scholar Sharon Ghuman, who asserts that “women may be more reticent than men about disclosing their sexual behavior in an interview,” exemplified in prior studies conducted in Vietnam which show that “unmarried men were three and seven times as likely as women to report having had premarital sex” (Ghuman 2006). Despite the notion that premarital sex has become accepted and normal in contemporary Vietnam, the topic remains a taboo in the country and specifically disadvantages Vietnamese girls. This mostly lends itself to gendered expectations produced and reinforced in the family unit, leaving it up to the individual to internalize or resist such stigmas.

### *Gender Conceptions in Youth Sexuality*

As stated before, traditional gender conceptions cannot be neglected when discussing the sexuality construction of Vietnamese urban youth, even amidst social changes. As a form of resistance to individualist ideals within a market economy, the state has incentivised a return to Vietnamese national identity; a notion reinforced through the family unit. It has thus become the responsibility of the family to preserve certain aspects of Vietnamese traditionalism, such as female chastity. So, “despite having considerably relaxed their control on youths, many parents



were of the view that premarital sexual relationships and unwanted pregnancies were shaming” (Nguyen 2007). Therefore, “they went to great lengths to safeguard the virginity of their daughters, preventing them from indulging in premarital sex. As for unmarried men, however, engaging in premarital sex, casual sex, and sex outside of a stable relationship were generally seen as 'going without saying' or were socially accepted” (Nguyen 2007). This familial concern with virginity, as well as its historically ascribed significance, has led to intriguing sex conceptions among sexually active youth in the dating world. Hymen reconstruction surgery, for example, is an increasing trend in Vietnam in which urban women undergo a temporary procedure that restores their broken hymen. In many cases, the purpose of this surgery is to physically produce ‘virginity.’ In the United States, phrases such as ‘she popped her cherry’ refers to the incidence in which having sexual intercourse tears a woman’s hymen. The cosmetic participation in such a surgery, then, indicates the pressures that Vietnamese women continue to face in emulating traditional gender roles associated with virginity and moreover, purity. Because “Confucian doctrines emphasize virginity as the single most important standard in evaluating a woman’s morality,” young women who participate in premarital sex create other pathways of resistance in order to resemble being virtuous. To them, appearing moral and virtuous, according to traditional gender conceptions, will allow them to find success in both the familial and market spheres of society. On the other hand, the way in which women manipulate market and familial pressures have led to a lack of discernment among young urban men, and their own conceptions of masculinity and sexuality. Specifically, “it becomes more difficult for men to assess female virtue through physical evidence” (Huong 2014). This “challenges traditional forms of masculine advantage, generating doubts and uncertainties among young men regarding their sexual relations and capacities” (Huong 2014). As women “actively resist the power of public

discourses on feminine sexuality in contemporary Vietnam,” men are repositioned within their conceptions of patriarchal masculinity. In one study, some men “appeared to fantasize about a realm of hegemonic masculinity where they control the terms and practice by which women's bodies are used and consumed” (Martin 2010). Many contemporary urban men turn to pornography and sex work in order to reaffirm their masculinities and ease their anxieties about changing sexualities within Vietnam.

The notion that sex is taboo in the context of changing sexuality conceptions has drastic impacts on the sexual self-efficacy of urban young people in Vietnam. The limited sexual health information provided by schools and healthcare providers in Vietnam are steeply rooted in Confucian heritage and preservation” (Huong 2014). The lack of information from the education system and medical system have prompted youth to depend on sources such as the Internet. However, the lack of institutional support for sexually curious adolescents leads to negative sex outcomes including assault, high abortion rates, and sexual harassment. These outcomes disproportionately impact women, who often silently suffer in the gray area between traditionalism and individualism. Because the sexual experiences of women are associated with familial honor, incidences of sexual violence and rape are “usually seen as an event that demands a collective family response; and negotiations about whether to report the rape to the police or whether to seek other forms of compensation or redress are undertaken by members of the larger kin group” (Huong 2014). Yet, because of the moral implications of women’s chastity, rape and assault could consequentially reflect dishonor on the behalf of the woman’s family, despite being the victim (Huong 2014). Knowing this, many women do not speak up about being abused or assaulted. Additionally, because Vietnamese youth are not expected “to need sexual/reproductive health services such as contraception,” many young women “begin their sexual lives with an

unwanted pregnancy which, in most cases, ends in an induced abortion” (Huong 2014). This finding presents another topic of concern in contemporary Vietnam, specifically embodied by young women. This is increasingly important, as “Vietnam has one of the highest abortion rates in the world, with an annual number of eighty-three induced abortions per one thousand women” (Hanh 2009). This is predominantly due to the gendered discrepancy in family planning, with many men believing that women are responsible for planning safe sex and providing contraception (Hanh 2009). As seen, the high rates of abortion within Vietnam are deeply rooted in a traditional gendered expectation of women’s actions being representative of the partilineal family.

#### *History of LGBTQ community in Vietnam*

Lastly, I want to touch on the LGBTQ embodied experiences in Vietnam, as they are integral to understanding modern sex conceptions among urban youth. The queer community in Vietnam was not formally recognized until the spread of HIV/AIDS and the resulting social evils campaign. Since then, however, there has been an increasing tolerance of queer people among fellow youth. This trend is less common among older generations, however, who are strongly influenced by “the cultural and religious frameworks of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, which play a central role in Vietnamese understandings of family, gender, and sexuality” (Horton and Rydstrom 2019). In these frameworks, “homosexuality did not receive any attention” (Horton and Rydstrom 2019). It is no surprise, then, that Saigon, the original proponent of economic and social reforms, is the “destination of choice for many gay men and lesbians in Vietnam” (Horton and Rydstrom 2019). Southerners are perceived to be more ‘open,’ alluding to Saigon’s willingness to integrate foreign influence and development strategies. For young queer people who move to this urban center, they too become positioned at the crossroads of personal

desire and familial belief. Some, “enter into heterosexual marriage as a means of appeasing their family, while others, instead, seek to get married to each other to fulfill family expectations while still being open about their sexuality to their partners” (Horton and Rydstrom). This concealment of sexual experiences from family presents a story of both strain and liberation. In this scenario, lesbian women and gay men can actualise their sexual desires, but at the expense of transparency with their families.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Methods*

The research that I conducted took place in Ho Chi Minh City from November 18th - December 18th, consisting of mixed methodology, including in-depth interviews, surveys, and observation. The aim of my research was to investigate the embodied sexual experiences and sex perceptions of university students in Vietnam. Therefore, my data collection was predominantly qualitative in nature, specifically focusing on the embodied experiences of individuals in order to find patterns among the population being studied. The population that I was concerned with was university students residing in Ho Chi Minh City, between the ages of 18 and 22. In the online survey that I conducted, there were 97 respondents. Out of these respondents, 49.5% of responders identified as female, 42.1% identified as male, 4.3% identified as non-binary, and 3.2% identified as gender fluid. The online survey consisted of a structured-text format, including multiple choice and short response. I also facilitated 15 in-depth anonymous interviews, in which 6 interviewees identified as female, 8 interviewees identified as male, and 1 interviewee identified as non-binary. Out of these interviewees, 3 of them were a part of the LGBTQ community. The interviews consisted of a structured-text format, in which I used content analysis and constant comparison analysis in order to obtain my findings. All of the

respondents, involved in both the online survey and in-depth interviews, were students on the Thanh Thai Campus of Hoa Sen University in Ho Chi Minh City. My correspondence with a gender studies professor at the university, Ngoc Doan, gave me the opportunity to present my research to four different classes. Because Professor Ngoc teaches gender studies, she was able to provide fresh insight in several informal meetings about feminism and gender conceptions among Vietnamese students. Aside from Hoa Sen University students, I have also had the opportunity to engage with several university students attending various institutions in the context of informal conversational interviews and observation. I also had the chance to speak with an undergraduate student attending the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi, Vietnam. He has conducted several studies pertaining to the lesbian community in Hanoi, and provided me with some of his findings regarding gender roles and sexuality in urban cities within Vietnam. I would describe my Independent Study Project as an ethnographic phenomenology, with the goal of obtaining a rich understanding of the meanings that university students in Ho Chi Minh City attach to their sexual experiences.

### *Limitations*

When crafting and executing my research, I was presented with several limitations that I would like to highlight in this section. The first limitation that presented itself in both my research as well as my time studying abroad, is the language barrier. The students at Hoa Sen University spoke limited English, and their attempts at translation without the aid of an interpreter could have resulted in numerous inaccuracies within my data collection. Furthermore, all of the literature that I reviewed on my topic was published in English, meaning that the existing studies written in Vietnamese were not available to me. Considering the English-written literature was published for English-speaking audiences, I believe that this could skew the

findings in such works, in a way that journal articles written in Vietnamese may not be. Another limitation in my research pertains to the allotted time in which I was able to conduct interviews, surveys, and literature reviews. Because of the constraints of my study abroad program, I was only given one month to research, interview, and write. Overall, I have only been residing in Vietnam for three months, an amount of time that is significant and yet comparably futile to those conducting research for larger amounts of time. All this to say, if those reading this paper are curious about this topic, I would suggest broadening your perspective by reading works completed by Vietnamese residents and researchers who have a deeper cultural understanding. Finally, as faced by other researchers on this topic, sex and sexuality are still considered taboo and culturally sensitive within Vietnam. While the hesitance to talk about sex is a finding within itself, it also provides certain discrepancies within my data collection.

## FINDINGS

### *Gender and Sexual Discourse*

Each of the fifteen students that I spoke with described peer conversations about sex as being very open and comfortable. Comments from my interviews such as “friends are so open-minded,” “peers are very open-minded and accepting,” and “younger people are quite open about their sexual experiences,” emphasize this. In the online survey that I conducted, 64.9% of respondents agreed that they are comfortable talking about sex among peers, 32% neither agreed nor disagreed, and only 2% of respondents disagreed (See Appendix for survey charts). Despite this exclamation, many of the interviewees spoke about the different gender experiences present within such conversations. For example, one female interviewee admitted that “boys will share all about their experiences with their friends and peer groups, but girls are too shy.” She

explained this shyness within the context of fear, saying that “girls are shy because they want to but they are scared.” Similarly, one of my female interviewees elaborated on the root of this shyness, stating that “when girls talk about sex, they are considered to be rude.” According to the same student, “boys will say out loud that he had sex with or assaulted someone as an achievement.” When asked if she has any personal experience with a boy who reflects this sentiment, she described a situation that occurred in her friend group. In the past, a boy she knew posted nude pictures of his girlfriend. When prompted to speak about the girlfriend’s reaction to such a violation, the student said that the girlfriend cried and cried for months and that this is “usually done to women, not the other way around.” This discrepancy between ideal masculinity and ideal femininity are exacerbated by an eighteen year old male student : “There is a saying about males that they should have sex, sort of like sex as an achievement. The saying in Vietnamese ‘Banh Mi phai co pate; don ong phai co mau de trong nguoi,’ which translates to ‘Even Banh Mi has pate; so why wouldn’t a man have the urge to have sex.’” He laughed after admitting this saying, and elaborated by explaining that “normally when men talk about having sex, they joke about it in front of the female, even if she is uncomfortable.” According to his self-reported statistics, “60% of men believe that males are dominant in the sex factor,” and that “this is one of their main missions in life.” His perception of the man’s role in sexual encounters is steeped in his cultural gender conception that “it’s in the nature of Vietnamese men to want to dominate or conquest the woman.” However, when asked about his own experiences, he exclaimed that “My focus is not about loving. I don’t even care about loving a woman right now. I don’t even have a job right now! Once I obtain enough conditions like money and a car, I will think about sharing my life with someone else.” The way that he conceptualizes masculinity within the family context prevents him from participating in sexual activity among his peers. As

discussed in the following section, parental resistance towards social changes within a market economy have a strong influence on the participation of youth in sexual activity. Numerous female students that I spoke with described the impact of their parent's beliefs about contemporary society on their own sexual practices.

### *Family and Premarital Sex*

One student that I interviewed, an eighteen year old female, began our conversation by stating that she thinks "Vietnam is still a very traditional country." She denied ever having had premarital sex, due to how "traditional and strict" her family is in daily life. In terms of her parents' beliefs, she stated that "my parents taught me don't have sex before marriage because it will lead to negative consequences and destroy your life." In an attempt to describe her own values, she went on to say that she, herself, is "not strict about this because if her and her lover are safe and they agree, than they can have sex before marriage." This statement seemed to coincide with popular peer conceptions, normalizing and accepting sexual openness. Out of curiosity, I asked if she would in fact, feel comfortable participating in premarital sex given her previous hypothetical scenario. She giggled nervously at this, and proceeded to say that "I wouldn't, as I am too young and it feels scary because of my parent's beliefs." As a matter of fact, many students described the social norm of criticising girls who participate in premarital sex, as opposed to the encouragement of young boys to do so. As one male respondent indicated, "in Vietnam, the man is really open but will break up with his partner if he finds out that she has had sex before." To him, the concept of virginity still influences a lot of men. He framed this as a gender inequality, in which "girls always receive more disadvantages than the man." When admitting that a lot of girls must hurt as a result from such societal and familial criticism, he began to describe a national tragedy in which a Vietnamese girl committed suicide because of



criticism she received after being broken up with by her boyfriend. He was not the only respondent to bring up girls committing suicide as a result of criticism. In a similar vein, one eighteen year old female respondent mentioned that parents worry that “if girls get broken up with, they will commit suicide.” It seems as though, rather than the heartbreak itself, it is the “bad feelings about women who have sex before marriage” that leads to such a catastrophe. One of the male respondents indicated that it is usually the people over 50 years old that have these ‘bad feelings’ about women participating in premarital sex. However, many of the other male respondents discussed other male peers that they know of who do not want to engage with women whom they know have engaged in premarital sex. In regards to the desire for the female partner to be a virgin, one male respondent explained that his friend ‘from the neighborhood’ once told him that “a girl who lost her virginity before marriage is a bad girl.” While the sexual activity of girls continue to be a reflection of morale, the decisions of men seem to be exempt. For example, the same respondent continued on by whispering to me that “boys can pay for sex,” and that he knows a hotel where university boys can book a room and “a girl will come and have sex with them.” In this instance, the sex worker is still ascribed as socially evil, and having a bad morale, while the male participant in such sexual activity is expected to partake in such a transaction. This was further exemplified by a twenty year old female respondent who said that “it’s terrible when girls make money like that,” referring to sex workers. She described sex workers as “girls from the countryside who come to the city and use their body to make money.” This respondent, who was the only female in my study who indicated having had premarital sex, seemed to value the importance of romantic relationship and commitment. When asked if she’s told anyone about her sexual experiences, she said that “I didn’t tell anyone, not my family or friends because if I talk to them, they could say negative things to me.” She then provided some

examples of what people could say, such as “you’re too young,” and “that’s bad,” etc.. According to her, she “feels comfortable [not telling anyone] because I didn’t want to hear anything not good about me.” This sentiment presented a paradox within my research: while sexually active Vietnamese girls are often talked about as silently suffering due to certain gender conceptions, some narratives indicate silence as a method of resistance towards more explicit societal and familial messages. For this respondent, she avoided internalizing shame that she found oppressive by keeping her sexual experiences to herself. While this narrative may be resonant for some, silence is certainly not always empowering.

### *Sexual Assault*

One of the interviewees, a nineteen year old student, identified as non-binary. They began our conversation by describing their identity: “From my personal experience, the reason why I’m non-binary is because in my childhood, I was raped and then was molested in secondary school, and didn’t feel comfortable identifying as female anymore.” When I asked if they had shared any of their assault experience with anyone, they said that “this is very private. I haven’t told my parents or friends.” They said that sometimes they tell someone that they know they won’t see a second time. They also expressed that, even though they don’t speak up, other people who have been sexually harassed should speak up because “when it happened to me, it affected my mental health a lot.” In explaining their reasoning for not speaking up or telling anyone about their experiences with assault, they said “I feel scared. In Vietnam, they have bad comments about that. They will call the girl ‘slutty,’ and they will blame the girl and say ‘it’s because you show too much of your skin.’” The topic of sexual assault seemed to resonate differently among the interviewees. Most students emphasized that “rape and sexual assault is very common among students,” while other respondents expressed that “assault is not common among University

students.” This being said, it is likely that assault is more common than expressed statistically, as a result of the amount of people who actually come forward given the cultural and historical context. In fact, the anonymous responses to the online survey indicated that sexual abuse, harassment, coercion, prostitution, and objectification are all relevant contemporary issues faced mainly by women, who then have significantly more negative sexual experiences than men do.

### *Student Perspectives on Pleasure*

At the same time, many of the students whom I interviewed described personal and peer engagements with sex as a dynamic and pleasurable experience. One of the questions in the online survey that I distributed out to the campus asked what a ‘positive’ sexual encounter means. The three concepts that were brought up the most in the responses were consent, pleasure, and protection. In describing his own interactions with premarital sex, one of the male respondents that I conducted an in-depth interview with informed me that he has had sex with people both casually and within relationships, wherein the woman and the man both orgasm. He followed this statement by alluding to several couples he knows in which the woman breaks up with the man because he is unable to “give her pleasure.” He believes that orgasm and pleasure are the main reasons why people should have sex before marriage. While one of the female respondents indicated that premarital sex is viewed by men as extra “experience for a future wife,” he seemed to understand sex as an egalitarian act, in which modern women and men mutually benefit. He described sex as a momentary act of love that doesn’t need to last, something he has embodied during several one-night stands while abroad in Singapore. Also supporting the idea that female students benefit from sex was an eighteen year old female respondent, who indicated that “it is common for girls to experience pleasure.” While she, herself, has not participated in premarital sex, she has a friend who “has pleasure with her

boyfriend.” Although according to her, it is uncommon for people in Vietnam to engage in premarital sex unless they are in relationships. Out of the fifteen interviews that I conducted, only one female student had participated in premarital sex, specifically with someone that she was dating at the time. Comparatively, out of the six heterosexual men that I interviewed, four of them had admitted to having premarital sex, and three of them emphasized having casual relationships, and friends-with-benefits. For most of the female students whom I interviewed, premarital sex was indeed normalized, although only considered safe within the confines of a secure and loving relationship. Heterosexual men, on the other hand, expressed considerably less hesitation and fear in both having casual premarital sex, as well as talking about their experiences.

#### *New Priorities in a Market Economy*

Some students tied their sexual experiences, or lackthereof, to market values and pressures among youth within contemporary society. One female respondent, in particular, talked about the monetary and educational justifications for wanting to be single. Her family, for instance, urges her to avoid having a boyfriend before graduating, as they believe having a relationship will affect her studies. Among her friend group, she expressed that “when we talk about this topic, we talk about the disadvantages of having a boyfriend, such as money and other conflicts.” Her and her friends “don’t care too much about having a relationship,” and “want to be single.” In this way, the economic opportunities presented to women during the market transition have both shaped familial and peer aspirations within the context of traditional culture. In conducting an interview with my homestay mother, for example, she disclosed to me that she gave away her money for university to her boyfriend at the time so that he could study. At the time, this was considered a noble sacrifice. Her 22 year old daughter, however, saw this as

evidence of gender inequality, and acknowledged that a modern woman would not make that decision, given the educational and career opportunities presented to her. So, while the state has urged a resurgence of traditional values, these values are modified and reshaped according to contemporary lifestyles. In essence, the family unit continues to emphasize women’s chastity, although this adherence is now incentivised through new priorities: women’s education and career.

### *LGBTQ Perspectives*

Four out of fifteen interview respondents identified as being a part of the LGBTQ community in Vietnam, a positionality that speaks volumes to the complex inner workings of contemporary social changes and the resurgence of traditionalism. This section will explore how queer youth experience and navigate this systemic clash. According to one gay male respondent, “Ho Chi Minh City is a modern city, most of the population here is open-minded about LGBT.” This was affirmed by an eighteen year old non-binary student who noted Ho Chi Minh City as being “free, welcoming to new things like gender, and comfortable with people showing their skin.” To these respondents, modernization and freedom are concepts associated with acceptance and tolerance. As indicated both throughout my literature review as well as multiple informal conversations with my homestay sister, the LGBTQ community has only recently become formally recognized since the spread of HIV in Vietnam. Older generations are much less likely to accept the LGBTQ community than contemporary youth are. According to one gay male respondent, “there is a generation gap. Parents think men need to get married to a girl.” When asked if he has disclosed his sexuality to his family, he responded that he hasn’t told either his mother or his father. He then described his mother as accepting, to an extent, but wants him to marry a rich person. If his father found out about his sexuality, however, “he would have to go to

a Buddhist monk.” This intolerance of queerness, however, does not just exude from the nuclear family. The family receives pressure from the outside community to curate the ideal family. For example, the respondent disclosed to me that “the neighborhood I was born in criticised my parents for having a gay son.” His parents would react to the neighborhood pressures by chastising him and saying “you will get married to a girl, and then get a baby for me.” Maintaining the ideal family, in this way, requires heterosexual relationships. Another male gay respondent told me that “I never share with my family about my sex, only my close friends.” However, as revealed later in the interview, his mother does know about his sexuality. His dad, however, is a “normal Vietnamese man and doesn’t accept gays but its okay because I have an older brother.” He laughed at this statement, explaining that the eldest son in a Vietnamese family receives the most pressure out of his siblings to marry a girl, earn money, and represent both family and masculinity ideals. Despite these familial constraints, all of the queer respondents indicated a sense of expression and freedom in the urban setting of Ho Chi Minh City. For one respondent, moving to the city actually allowed him to feel closer to his family of whom didn’t accept his sexuality. For him, living in the guise of straightness in his hometown made him feel “shy and upset,” and eventually, resulted in him connecting with his family less and less. Upon moving to the city for University and having the freedom to explore his sexuality and identity in tolerant spaces, he felt more comfortable speaking and connecting with his parents. While he does not have parental permission, he finds permission through his educational environment, of which is “very open minded and accepting of everyone. The goal of Hoa Sen University is to accept everyone.” He is now in a relationship that he feels “very lucky for.” Another gay male respondent described University as a similar outlet, stating that “sometimes at university, I share with my teacher and they give me advice and don’t tell my family.” He has

been in two relationships, and prefers secure relationships instead of using dating apps. His reasoning for this preference was because of his “fear of STDs.” So, in his current relationship, he stated that “I ask him to use condoms when we have sex because I have a lot of knowledge about sex, disease, and gender development.” This knowledge, for him, primarily comes from trusted professors, as well as social media. Another respondent indicated that Tik Tok, Google, and Youtube were especially helpful in educating the queer community on sex education. He uses Tik Tok the most, because one can find “a lot of doctors really willing to explain topics related to sexual health.” Because gay marriage in Vietnam is still illegal, the stigma of participating in premarital sex does not apply to gay and lesbian students. Ironically, the exclusion of LGBTQ youth in Vietnamese society grant these youth more permission to actualize their sexual desires, if they are able to seek out tolerant spaces. The challenge of belonging, however, is a tender and brave struggle that LGBTQ students face.

### *Sex Education*

In this last section, I would like to consider the different modes of sex education among Vietnamese students; specifically, how they are used, interpreted, and internalized. In the online survey that I conducted, 59.4% of respondents agreed that there is a lack of information about sex and sexual health among Vietnamese students, with 31.3% of students neither agreeing nor disagreeing, and only 9.3% of respondents disagreeing. In the United States, it is the responsibility of the family and the school to educate children on how to have safe sex. However, in the Vietnamese context, the family is expected to instill the values of chastity, which doesn't often coexist with comprehensive sex education. And most teachers and schools within Vietnam shy away from the topic of sex, given the cultural sensitivity of the topic. As a result, the main source of education that contemporary students turn to is the Internet. According to one male

respondent, “My family doesn’t talk to me much about sex and gender but I learn through the Internet.” Another male respondent indicated that neither him nor his partner ever received sex education. Because of this, the first time that they had sex they were both “kind of confused.” According to him, “it took 3 hours.” The second time they had sex, however, they had more information, specifically “from the Internet.” This same student highlighted that “in Vietnam, sex education is not taught under an educational environment.” A female respondent, when describing her first instance of premarital sex, said that “I didn’t use protection before because I had never studied it before and only saw it in movies.” In fact, she stated that “this [my presentation] was the first time she has learned about sex education in school,” and has otherwise “learned through the internet.” In her opinion, she disagrees with the perception that young people shouldn’t have sex, and believes that “schools should teach sex education.” Another female respondent told me that “she found out about sex through peer interactions in sixth grade,” and that her family didn’t “give her any information.” Aside from peer interactions, she learned about sex through “films, and thought it was scary but exciting.” A non-binary respondent indicated that they learn about sex through “watching a lot of movies, such as the Netflix show Sex Education.” When students solely learn about sex through media consumption, however, they take the risk of internalizing the sexual scripts offered in such representations. Namely, sex displayed in the media is not always accurate or helpful in understanding how to have safe and pleasurable sexual experiences. As one male respondent indicates, “watching porn is really normal, but not realistic.” He then went on to describe an interaction with one of his friends, in which his friend “lost confidence in himself after watching porn” because “the men in porn were able to wait a long time before ejaculating.” The student used this example to illustrate the mental health impacts of internalizing certain forms of media. He displayed the awareness



that “porn is not the best way to learn about sex, and that the best way to learn would be through a teacher or legal website.” Through media consumption, students not only learn what sex is and how they ‘should’ have sex, but also how to talk about and perceive it. For example, one female respondent commented that “boys are expected to talk about sex more than girls,” and that this “is strongly influenced by movies.” Despite the prominent role that the Internet has on inadvertently educating Vietnamese youth on sex, many respondents pointed to the lack of information in schools and families as the root of high abortion rates and young pregnancies. One of the male respondents, for example, kicked off our interview with a ‘fun-fact’: that is, that he has “heard of some children in Vietnam being pregnant at the age of 9 or 10.” Similarly, a female respondent, in justifying her reasoning for not wanting a relationship, told me that “many people in Vietnam are pregnant at a young age.” One of the male students that I spoke with deemed the ability of “young girls to bring a child into the world” as reasons why they “need to be protected.” Many of the respondents attributed these experiences to a lack of understanding about safe sex. However, these cases described by students were not indicative of the entire population. In fact, most students described *themselves* as active agents, aware of safe sex practices and educated on such issues. Even for those who had experiences wherein they “didn’t use contraception or STI prevention,” they described these sexual encounters as past experiences *before* they learned more. One male student, in describing his two-year relationship, said that “honestly we didn’t have sex because I respect her and we are not ready. If we do, we will have to use condoms and STI prevention.” Another student indicated that his secondary school taught him basic contraception and STI prevention, as well as information on the Plan B pill. He described his first experience with premarital sex as positive, in which he used a condom. Another male student, after a negative first sexual experience without a condom, now makes sure

that him and his partner engage with sexual protection to avoid contracting any sexually-transmitted diseases. He described himself as someone who has “a lot of knowledge about sex, disease, and gender development.” Another respondent informed me that because “his mother works in the medical field,” she taught him how to engage in safe sex. So, while not knowing much about sexual activity, his first experience was safe and pleasurable for both participants. The sexual health and education of Vietnamese youth is a diverse amalgamation of family values, media consumption, embodied experience, and peer interactions. The cultural contexts and social structures present within Vietnam serve as references that Vietnamese youth interact with, internalize, and reject on a daily basis.

## DISCUSSION

As found from both surveys and in-depth interviews, talking about the topic of sex is becoming increasingly normal among Vietnamese university students, despite its historical cultural sensitivity. When analyzing how this topic is most commonly discussed, gender conceptions become apparent. Essentially, it's more acceptable for boys to talk about sex, whereas girls are expected to shy away from these conversations. Men are expected to talk about their sexual experiences in a proud manner, affirming his own sense of masculinity. Interview findings suggest that the shyness among Vietnamese girls to engage in conversations about sex are rooted in fear. Specifically, the fear of being scrutinized and criticized by family, and ultimately, by society. This creates diverse experiences for girls, all of which are inseparable from the impact of traditionalism on contemporary youth.

For some girls who participate in premarital sex, they often keep their sexual experiences to themselves out of fear of being criticised by their families. These societal criticisms often rely

on a moral dichotomy: girls who have premarital sex are bad women, and those who abstain from premarital sex are fulfilling the traditional virtue of chastity. The female students that I interviewed who do not participate in premarital sex, however, are motivated by a similar fear as those who do. In this way, the sexual health of contemporary Vietnamese youth is correlated to the beliefs of one's family. This shows that even within the market economy, new economic and social changes cannot be separated from the historical importance of Vietnamese collectivism. Another example of this is families who strongly identify with traditional (Confucian) gender roles, and yet encourage their child to be successful, educated, and career-oriented. The economic opportunities presented to girls and women since the economic liberalization in 1986 forced families to either adapt or resist these social changes, all within the rules of an emerging market economy. Traditionalism, in this way, is defined and modified through the market economy. At the same time, youth raised in consumer culture that construct their identities through foreign influence, cannot be studied without understanding Vietnam's cultural history. This is especially true as youth make choices everyday that are either affirmed or criticized by peers, family, state, etc. So, in this way, the values and identities within a market economy are also defined and modified by Vietnamese traditionalism.

The gender conceptions presented by the men in my research offer intriguing insight into the paradoxical relationship between a market economy and a resurgence of traditional values. Most heterosexual men that I interviewed reflected the notion that they are more comfortable talking about sex than their female counterparts. Specifically, conversations that I had alluded to many sexual freedoms that men are able to have. Freedom, in this sense, refers to an experience that is not stigmatized among men, but is stigmatized among women. For example, engaging with sex workers, watching porn, having casual partners, and having premarital sex are all

activities that are expected of boys rather than girls. Both male and female students affirmed this in the anecdotes that they shared with me. If not within the context of a market economy, these gender inequalities may not be so apparent. However, on a daily basis, contemporary youth are being exposed to Western representations of sex in the media that are based on drastically different cultural conceptions of sex. Some gender pressures have changed among families since economic liberalization and normalization of higher education among urban youth. So instead of encouraging early marriage as a means of securing family status and security, certain parents now urge daughters to avoid relationships because of the possible economic opportunities presented with high education. The gender distinctions and inequalities in sex culture, then, can create negative sexual experiences for girls, specifically as youth discover that they're identities and decisions rarely satisfy both traditionalist and market pressures.

The embodied sexual experiences of LGBTQ students that I interviewed illuminated a distinct relationship to the family unit, that can not be conflated with heterosexual gender conceptions and expectations. For example, while most of the students that I interviewed had no intention of ever telling their families about their sexualities, moving to an urban setting gave them the freedom to express and actualize their sexual desires. Additionally, many of them felt affirmed and accepted by their peers at the university that they attended. In a sense, queer youth are uniquely positioned in that they are forced to reject a larger amount of societal gender and sex conceptions, forcing them to co-create relationships and sexual experiences that are otherwise invisible to society. This does not, however, diminish the felt hardships and struggles that coincide with existing in a body that is not considered societally acceptable.

While schools and families are sometimes reluctant to educate Vietnamese youth on sexual health, contemporary students seem unanimously inspired to actualize positive sex

experiences. More and more, students acknowledge the importance of sex education as a means of battling contemporary issues within society, such as: assault, high abortion rates, early pregnancy, and the transmission of HIV/AIDS. While many students expressed frustration that there was a lack of sex education in their own lives, most utilized the Internet as a portal for understanding. While the role of the Internet in sex education can lead to misunderstandings, gender inequalities, and lowered self esteem, it can also empower certain youth to know more about their bodies, to feel informed in their sexual experiences, and to feel affirmed within their sexualities.

There is a stark double standard present in the social expectations of gender performance. This is exemplified through peer relationships compared to familial relationships. University students rely on peer validation to explore new gender and sexuality opportunities emerging within a digital age and market economy, while parents not directly exposed to consumerist identity changes rely on traditional gender roles to dictate the trajectory of adolescent lives and values.

## CONCLUSION

Western scholars can often make the mistake of conflating traditional culture with being oppressive. Yet, what is happening today, is the interdependent relationship between traditionalism and Western conceptions of feminism and gender. It is the resulting impacts, then, that produce certain harmful scripts for Vietnamese youth. It is the reinforcement of traditionalism within a market economy that creates a culture of resistance and conformity.

The struggles and silent sufferings of Vietnamese youth act as a glaring wake up call for older generations. This is especially relevant considering that the institution of family continues to be a sort of nucleus upon which urban youth draw forms of resistance or conformity. The way

that Vietnam has developed as a country is unique: and so too, is its pathways towards collective liberation. Vietnamese youth are a continuous representation of all of Vietnamese culture, both how it has been sustained and changed. In this way, listening to the voices of youth themselves, may offer insight for the state to implement culturally appropriate practices and policies that offer more portals towards embodied pleasure. What this liberation looks like, however, is not ethical nor sensible for me to comment on or to attempt envisioning. Liberation looks and feels different depending on the culture and society!

My research allowed me to unravel and analyze the complexities between self and society within contemporary Vietnam. The topic of embodied sexual experiences and perceptions distinguishes sexual discourse into peer and societal relations. Among peers, the Vietnamese individual perceives themselves to be open-minded, comfortable with change, and modern. In reference to society, students emphasized a sentiment of shyness. The ways in which students perceive themselves in relation to society indicate that contemporary Vietnamese youth are in a critical period of emergence. Don't listen to me, listen to them!

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## APPENDIX

2. If comfortable, please indicate the gender identity that best describes you: Nếu cảm thấy thoải mái, bạn hãy vui lòng cho biết bản dạng giới mô tả đúng nhất về bạn:

95 responses

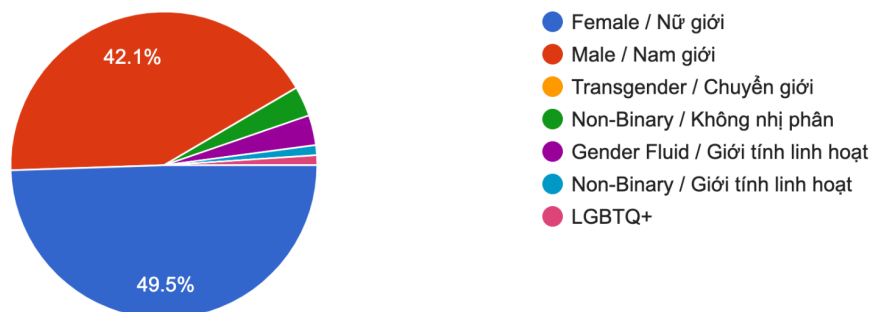


FIGURE 1

4. I feel comfortable talking about sex and/or dating with my peers Tôi cảm thấy thoải mái khi nói về tình dục và/hoặc hẹn hò với bạn cùng trang lứa

97 responses

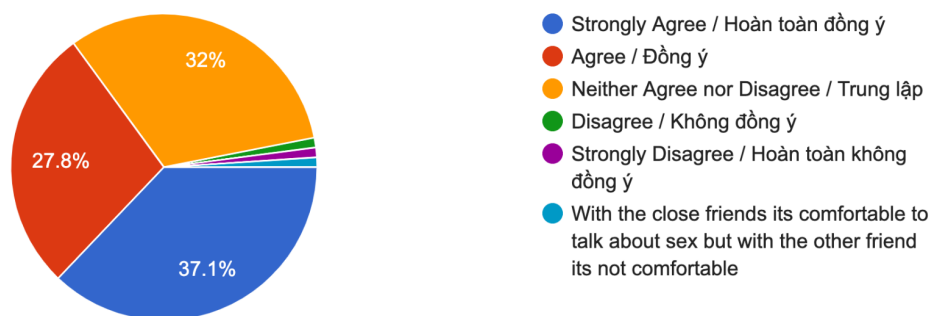


FIGURE 2

5. I feel comfortable talking about sex and/or dating with my family Tôi cảm thấy thoải mái khi nói về tình dục và/hoặc hẹn hò với người trong gia đình mình

97 responses

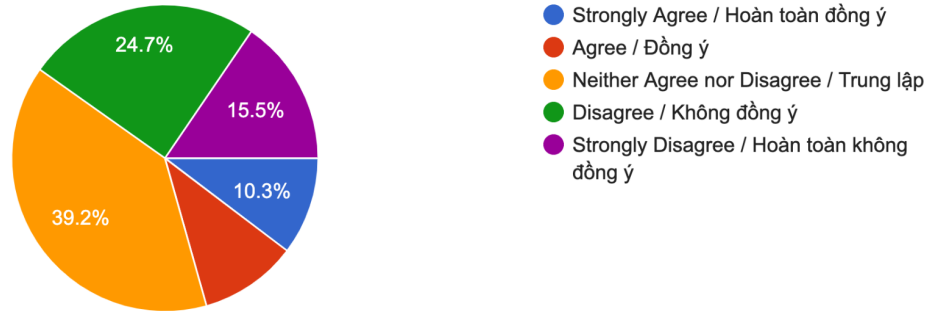


FIGURE 3

7. I have participated in premarital sex Tôi đã từng quan hệ tình dục trước hôn nhân

97 responses

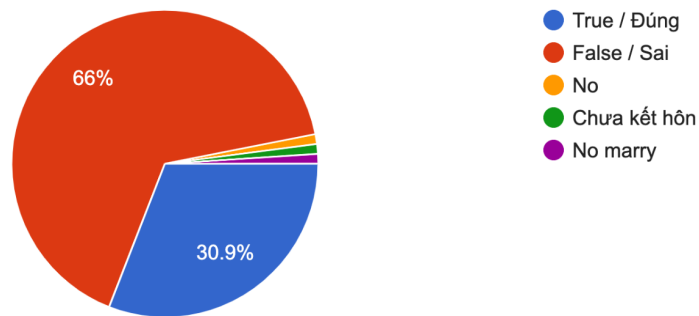


FIGURE 4

8. I believe that participating in sexual activity or premarital sex is common in the city that I currently live in among Vietnamese students Tôi t...ành phố mà tôi sống trong giới sinh viên Việt Nam  
97 responses

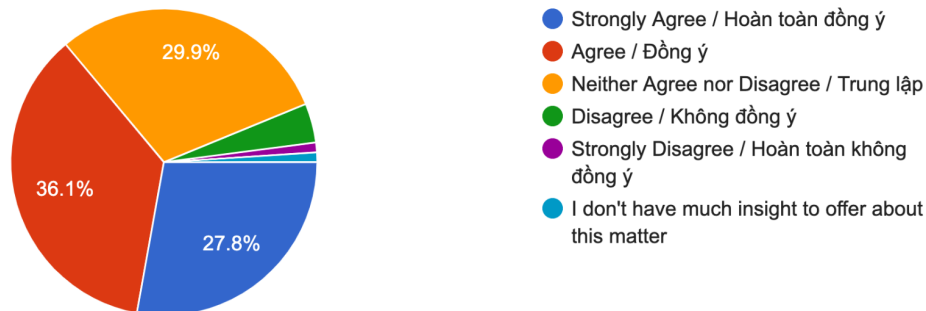


FIGURE 5

9. I believe that modern Vietnamese youth perceive sex and sexuality differently than older generations Tôi tin rằng giới trẻ Việt Nam hiện đại...nhận về giới tính và tình dục khác với thế hệ trước  
97 responses

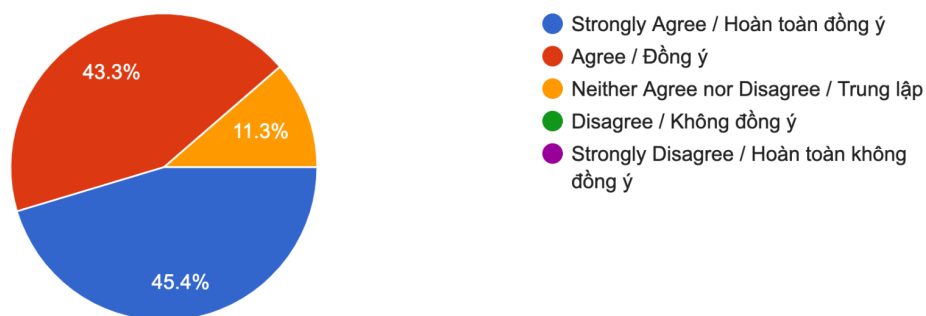


FIGURE 6

### 11. What do you define as a 'positive' sexual experience?

Bạn định nghĩa thế nào là quan hệ tình dục 'tích cực'?

80 responses

A relationship brings many enjoyable experiences and when having sex makes each person's life happier and more positive. It can be said that it is an effective way to reduce stress

I think 'positive' sexual is when you have enough knowledge and knowledge about it. You are not completely dependent on it and should recognize its good and bad sides.

Everyone feel comfortable when they do that

Đôi bên đều đồng ý, vui vẻ và đón nhận điều đó

both sides volunteered and their lives were not affected

suy nghĩ thoáng hơn, sự cởi mở

The sexual experience that received confirmation from everyone that involved in

When both 2 people agree and happy to do it

Safe and between lovers

Positive sexual will bring about satisfying feelings especially safety.

Là khi có sự đồng ý của cả 2 người

Its help they positive between many trouble and satisfied each other

Là hai bên đều vui vẻ khi quan hệ, chỉ quan trọng cảm xúc của nhau

A healthy, non-violation sexual experience can be considered as a 'positive' activity

Safe sex

Feel relax, comfortable

In my opinion it comes from many sides but it is important to have the agreement of both sides

The agreement for sexual experience from both sides, using protective products.

Sử dụng phương pháp phòng tránh an toàn

Theo tôi, QHTD tích cực nghĩa là cần đảm bảo các yếu tố sau: an toàn, mang lại trải nghiệm thích thú (khoái cảm khi QHTD), có quản lí (cân bằng được thời gian với những công việc khác và có giới hạn về số lần QHTD) và cảm xúc này phải đến từ cả hai phía.

i think it's harmony

cả 2 bên đều đồng thuận về việc quan hệ tình dục

Cả hai hiểu nhau hơn và có lối sống tích cực vui vẻ , lạc quan yêu đời hơn.

a positive sexual experience from my point of view is an activity that recieved consensus from the participants

To my mind, a positive sexual experience is the relationship that the partner doesn't take advantages of the

The partner know risk of negative sexual experience, and protect each other by some solution

Give again both pleasure

Quan hệ tình dục "tích cực" là 2 bên cùng tình nguyện và không có sự ép buộc của đối phương.

Safe,informed and comfortable if it occurs at the appropriate time and with permission from both parties

khi họ thật sự có tình cảm và cảm xúc với nhau, khi cả 2 chủ động và đồng ý

Bring happiness and make partner feel safe, be responsible for the consequences

Having sex 1 time a week have a positive for both and decrease stress, bring pleasure.

Safe

I think that is the sex from a both

It is you use condom this will protect you

Cả 2 đều có sự đồng ý

Đến từ tình yêu trong tâm hồn, cá thể một cách tự nguyện.

cởi mở

a 'positive' sexual means you'll have a safety sex by using condom,etc too preventing sexual illness like HIV,AIDS,etc.

Quan hệ tình dục trên tinh thần tự nguyện và không ép buộc

Quan hệ tình dục tích cực là quan hệ tình dục giúp chúng ta thoải mái và tốt hơn trong cuộc sống

You feel happiness when you can do that with your partner.

trao đổi tình yêu

Acceptance from both sides without coercion

Theo mình, tình dục "tích cực" là có sự đồng thuận của 2 bên và quan hệ an toàn (sử dụng đồ bảo vệ và đảm bảo sạch sẽ)

In my opinion, a positive sexual requires consent and comfort from both parties. And during sex there is no violence here

Mối quan hệ lành mạnh

Thích thì quan hệ thôi :)

improve thinking of young adults moreover sexual give you more experience before weding and chose exactly your partner in the future

Hai bên đồng thuận khi quan hệ tình dục

Nice !

Không ràng buộc kh cưỡng ép và tự nguyện, và quan hệ 1 cách hợp lý

Là mối quan hệ được sự đồng thuận của hai bên và phù hợp với đạo đức con người.

Cả 2 cùng đồng tình , và quan hệ an toàn

Là không chất kích thích, không lợi dụng trái pháp luật

Tình nguyện không ép buộc

I think a positive sexual experience. Both of people agree to have sex

Like a release the stress

Tình dục tích cực là xem tình dục như một điều tích cực trong cuộc sống con người. Trong lịch sử, người ta thường nhìn nhận tình dục từ khuôn khổ đạo đức (dựa trên tội lỗi) hoặc y học (dựa trên bệnh tật hoặc tệ nạn). Thông qua những lăng kính này, các ham muốn và hoạt động tình dục lành mạnh bị xem là thứ cần được kìm nén, kiểm soát hoặc chữa khỏi.

In my opinion, I think "positive" sexual can be about using contraception when having condom, ...). It is also possible that both individuals have sex with each other voluntarily without any coercion

Là cả hai thoả mãn những nhu cầu cần thiết cho nhau khiến tình yêu của hai người trở nên đậm sâu và phát triển hơn

Tôn trọng lẫn nhau

I think that is doing sex with the agreement of the partner.

Right person at Right time!

Hai bên đều tình nguyện, không gây hại cho đối phương

Tôi nghĩ là tự nguyện hai bên không ép buộc

quan hệ tình dục có biện pháp bảo vệ khỏi bệnh truyền nhiễm



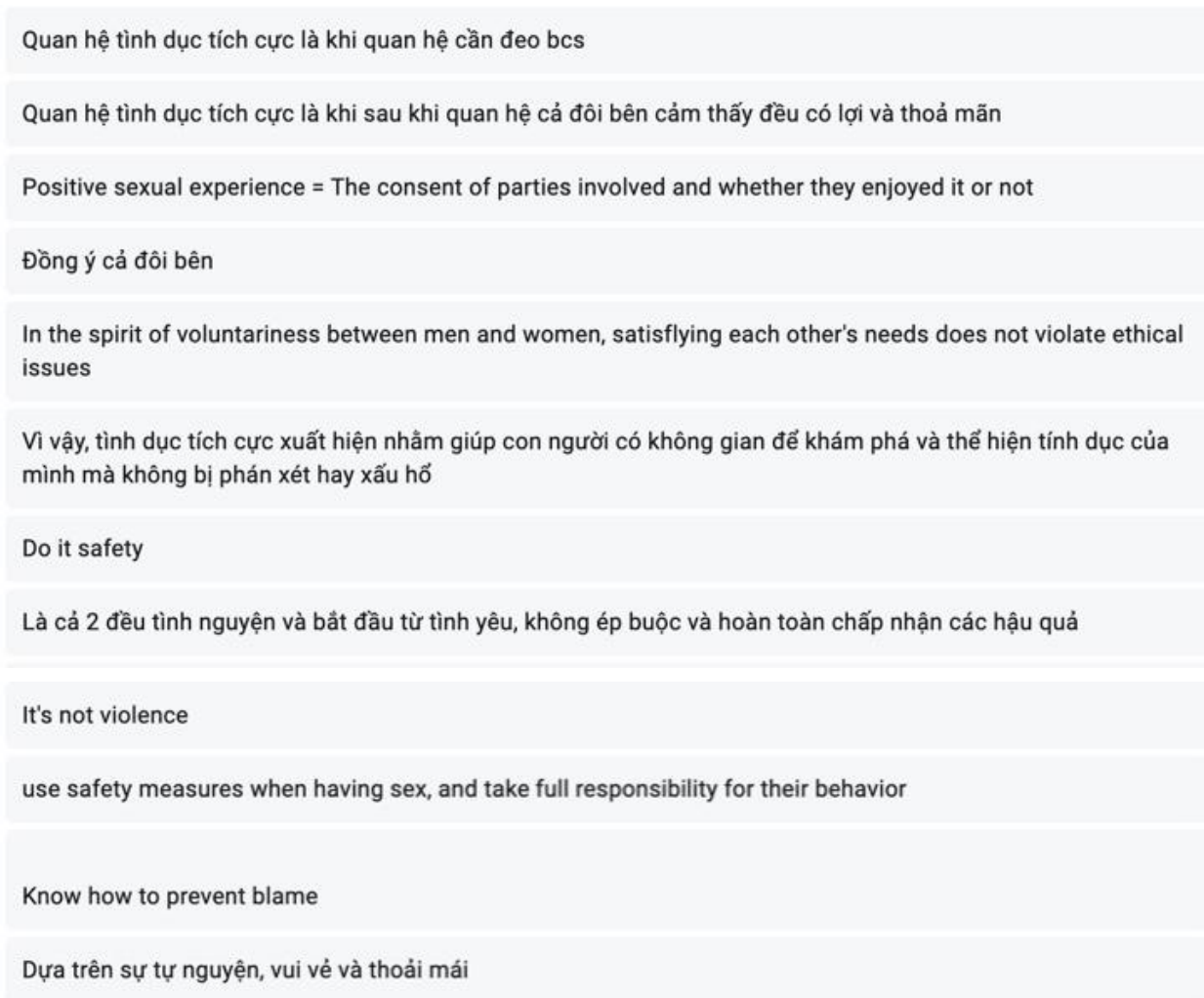


FIGURE 7

12. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement: There is lack of information about sex and sexual health among Viet...thiếu thông tin về giới tính và sức khỏe tình dục  
96 responses

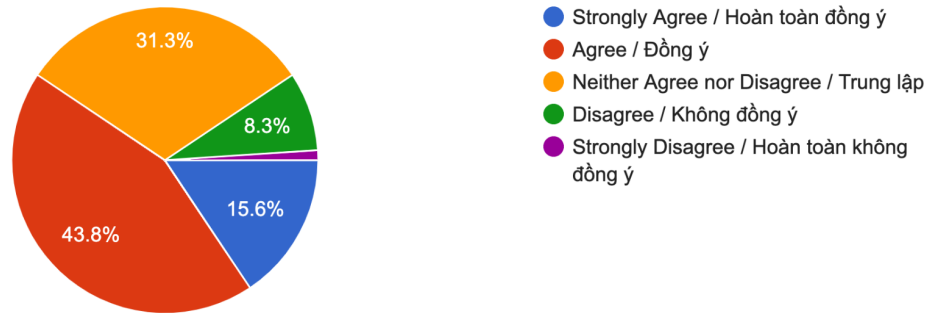


FIGURE 8

13. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement: Young women have more negative experiences of sex than men do Phụ...ều trải nghiệm tiêu cực về tình dục hơn nam giới  
96 responses

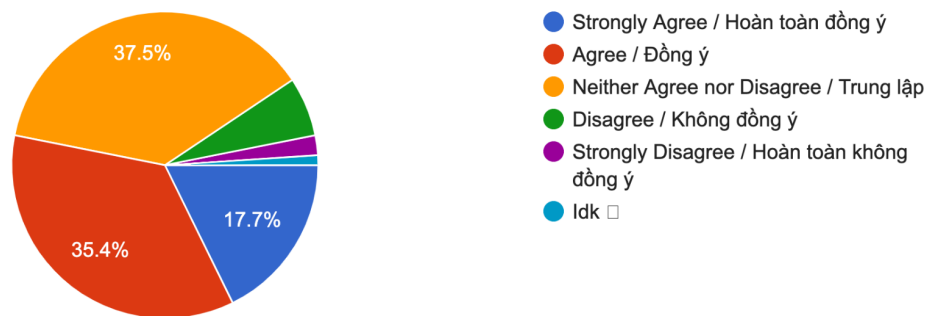


FIGURE 9