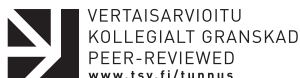


# Constructing Queerness in Vietnam: Essentialism, Homonormativity, and Social Hierarchy

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## Abstract

The article is based on a qualitative research that focused on the way in which young Vietnamese queers construct their identities and social relationships. The interview data used in the study suggest that most interviewees strongly conform to gender/sexual norms and conceptualize their identities through essentialism. Such conformity leads to the regulation of gender behaviours and romantic relationships in this community, and contributes to a lack of solidarity among different queer groups. The research demonstrates the mechanism through which a social hierarchy based on norms of class and homonormativity emerges in this queer community. Worth noting is that the identity formation and identity politics of these young people also reflect the different values originating from Vietnam's previous colonial contact with both the West and the East.

**KEYWORDS:** Class, consumerism, cosmopolitanism, essentialism, identity politics, homonormativity, queer, Vietnam.

## Introduction

In identity politics, people and groups organize their identities through political classifications to address oppression and marginalization, as well as to advocate for the recognition of minority groups. This political style is strongly linked with the gay and lesbian movements in North America and Europe around the 1970s and 1980s, in which the individual's identification with homosexuality and "coming out" became central aspects of the movements (Bernstein

1997; Epstein 1987). An emphasis on an essentialist understanding of sexual identity prevailed in the dominant discourse throughout these movements and continues to be predominant in current identity politics. This discourse aims to normalize same-sex relationships and to legitimize homosexuality as a form of sexual diversity. In Vietnamese LGBT<sup>1</sup> activism as well, essentialism remains the dominant rhetoric, in

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1 Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual.

which queer<sup>2</sup> identities are classified along specific sexual and gender labels. This can be observed in manuals and instructions for queers produced by activist organizations (see, e.g., ICS 2013). While the use of essentialism is effective as a political strategy, it also can be problematic due to the discursive positioning, which establishes queerness as a “natural” form of diversity and therefore as deserving legitimacy. This line of argument reinforces the rationality behind the “truth of sex,” a discourse which turns sexual behaviours into stable, essential identities that can be organized around norms (Foucault 1978). Inadvertently, the effort of “liberating” queers classifies this community into categories (such as LGBT) depending on *how* they are different from or consistent with the norm, and transforms both sexual behaviours and gender into a form of identity.

While identity classification gives people tools to exercise their agency and to unite against an oppressive social structure, conformity to these identity categories can lead to undesired outcomes. Michel Foucault (1984) predicts that conformity to sexual labels can lead queers to pursue a new system of ethics operated under the spirit of heterosexuality. While labels enable people to find belonging in new kinds of relationships, conformity to labels can lead to the creation of a new social reality with new constraints and limits (ibid.). Such conformity paves the way to a kind of politics that normalizes homosexual relationships through the exercise of heteronormativity. Lisa Duggan (2003, 179) coins the term “homonormativity” to describe “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormativity assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility

of a demobilized gay constituency.” In Western societies, this conformity has meant that the queer identity is constructed via a culture of consumerism, which shows no signs of contestation of dominant heteronormativity. Through this politics, whether a queer identity is “worthy” of social acceptance is determined by how closely it imitates heteronormativity (ibid.; Flores 2013). Shannon Weber (2012) argues that the appeal to essentialism and homonormativity leads to the creation of a mainstream queer image that is presented as natural and mirroring heteronormativity.

The aim in this article is to investigate how the doctrine of essentialism and a homonormative approach are used by members of the queer community to construct queer representations in contemporary Vietnam. Using Foucault’s argument (1984), I analyse how conformity to classifications can inadvertently create a new social reality with new norms and rules of conduct. To make sense of this new reality, I rely on Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of “field” to describe the queer scene in Vietnam as a space of struggle and competition for social recognition. In this field, norms of gender, sexuality, and class are used to divide the queer community into different hierarchical groups.

The article is structured as follows: First, I will give an overview of the research context, followed by a short discussion on data and methods. Then, I will address how the interviewees conceptualize their identities and relationships using the doctrine of essentialism and homonormativity. After that, I will discuss how the use of these doctrines leads to the formation of a social hierarchy based on norms of gender, sexuality, and class. I second Toril Moi’s (2001) argument that essentialism is not an inherently problematic ideology; however, as previously discussed, using essentialism to claim queer legitimacy may pose the risk of marginalizing some populations in the queer

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2 In this article, I use the term “queer” to refer to all non-normative sexual/gender identities, including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.

community and, as I will demonstrate, contribute to the development of a queer field that embraces heteronormativity.

## Context of the Research

Raffin (2008) characterizes the modern Socialist Republic of Vietnam as having a hybrid identity shaped by both Western imperialism and communist ideals. Indeed, knowledge of *giới* [sex/gender] in Vietnam is dictated by different and, at times, contradictory forces due to the nation's long history of involvement with other cultures. Blanc (2005, 671) describes the Vietnamese knowledge of gender and sexuality as a "tradition influenced by colonial contact and revitalized by the effects of globalization."

Having been under the influence of China for over a thousand years, Vietnam has adopted Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism; these belief systems, known as the *Tam Giáo* [Three Teachings], mutually shape Vietnamese cultural values and daily practices (Blanc 2005; Zhan 2002). Confucianism emphasizes hierarchical gender roles in human relations, contributing to the patrilineal kinship system and to male domination in Vietnam. There are, however, no rules for hierarchy within a same-sex romantic relationship, making homosexual relationships problematic in a Confucian worldview (Zhan 2002). Taoism shapes Vietnamese family institutions through its emphasis on harmony and the notion that men and women are opposing yet complementary energies. This gives rise to the cultural expectation for heterosexual union, while posing same-sex relationships as a disruption to harmony (Zhan 2002). Buddhism as a commonly practiced religion emphasizes the extinction of personal attachment and lust. The practice of Buddhism in Vietnam discourages the pursuit of sexual fulfilment outside of marriage, and therefore also discourages homosexual relationships.

Apart from the Three Teachings, Vietnam is also influenced by Christianity, which was first introduced by Catholic missionaries from Europe in the 16th century. When the French colonized Vietnam from 1867 to 1945, Catholicism became dominant and widespread. Today, Catholicism remains a popular religion in Vietnam. The theology reinforces the view of the Three Teachings, maintaining that homosexual behaviour is a moral disorder and is against nature. Blanc (2005) observes that male domination and sexual dimorphism was reinforced during the French colonial period in Vietnam, and these cultural attitudes contribute to public stigma and prejudice towards homosexual relationships.

After Vietnam became a unified independent country in 1975, the Communist Party of Vietnam encouraged both sexes to participate in the postwar economy, reducing gender inequality (Khuất 1997). However, this socialist reconstruction movement also led to the suppression of sexual relations outside of marriage, branding them as immoral (UNDP & USAID 2014). In 2000, Vietnam prohibited same-sex unions. This was followed by a period of extreme stigmatization of queer identities. In 2002, the Vietnamese state media labelled homosexuality<sup>3</sup> as a *tệ nạn xã hội* [social disease], placing it in the same category with drug use, prostitution, and gambling. The national campaign to fight against the "social disease" led to the arrest of many homosexuals, increasing prejudice against queers (ibid.).

During this period, the public discussion on homosexuality centred around its cause, and whether that cause could be attributed to "nature"

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3 For the Vietnamese public at the time, there was no clear distinction between different queer categories. The term *đồng tính* [homosexuality] was used to refer to non-heterosexual people, transgender people, and those with ambiguous gender expression.

or “nurture.” Some contended that homosexuality might be a genetic or a psychological disorder. Others attributed it to a social cause, perhaps the consequence of childhood neglect and abuse or the manifestation of a materialist, Western-oriented lifestyle<sup>4</sup> (Nguyễn, Vũ & Lê 2012). A joint study by the Institute for Studies of Society, Economics, and the Environment and the Vietnamese Academy of Journalism and Communication (2011) showed that the Vietnamese media portrayed homosexuality as being a consequence of the collapse of moral values. Homosexual intercourse was depicted as powerful and addictive, yet same-sex relationships were considered unstable and short-lived. Many medical professionals shared the view that therapy, education, and social integration could “cure” homosexuality (Phạm 2013).

Only a decade later, significant changes have occurred in the official position and social discourse on queer people. Vietnam decriminalized homosexual unions in 2014, and legalized sex-reassignment surgery in 2015. The diffusion of foreign mass media, the adoption of new technologies, and the establishment of nongovernmental organizations working toward equality have brought forth these positive changes. The expansion of the Internet and international media outlets has formed a space for users to find alternative knowledge on gender and sexuality. This is particularly true of Vietnamese youth, who turn to the Internet, instead of state media, to find answers about their sexual desires and practices (Ngô, Ross & Ratliff 2008). The Internet also provides a virtual space

for the creation of online queer communities, bringing together queers from different regions and aiding the establishment of LGBT activist organizations (UNDP & USAID 2014). These LGBT organizations bring into public discussions new discourses<sup>5</sup> on human rights and gender/sexual diversity through their research and training activities for young activists.

These changes in the Vietnamese society are initially what motivated me to conduct this research. I was particularly interested in the way Vietnamese queer youth, who have witnessed the drastic status change of queerness in Vietnam in the last decade, construct their identities and characterize their social interactions. In addition, I look into the norms that shape these young people’s behaviours and the formation of a social hierarchy within this queer community. I will address the following research questions:

1. How do essentialism and homonormativity affect the organization of the Vietnamese queer youth community?
2. What are the social norms that shape the Vietnamese queer field?

## Data and Methods

This study utilizes interview data from ethnographic fieldwork done in Hồ Chí Minh City, Vietnam from June to December 2014. The fieldwork involved ethnographical observations and qualitative interviews with 17 young people who identified as members of the Vietnamese queer community. The study participants were young people from 18 to 28 years old, mainly middle-

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4 A study by the Institute for Studies of Society, Economics, and the Environment and the Academy of Journalism and Communication (2011) on the representation of homosexuality in the media found that homosexuality was perceived to be more acceptable in foreign contexts. In the Vietnamese context, homosexuals were portrayed as young people who were after a Western lifestyle and who expressed gender differently from the norm to be seen as “fashionable.”

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5 The discourse and knowledge these organizations use are based on American theories of sexuality and gender, such as those of Freud, Kinsey, and Cass, in addition to materials from the American Psychological Association (see Phạm 2013).

class and living in Hồ Chí Minh City. Half of these interviewees were activists, introduced to my research project through the nonprofit organization ICS<sup>6</sup>. The other half were recruited through snowballing techniques. All interviewees were attending or had graduated from college.

Most interviews were one on one: Two group interviews (a couple and a group of friends) were exceptions. The interviews lasted from one to two hours, covering topics such as life experiences, the use of linguistic terms related to queer identities, and social relationships. All interviews were semi-structured and conducted in Vietnamese; some interviewees occasionally used English in the interviews. In this article, I have translated all the excerpts from Vietnamese into English.

After the data collection, I used thematic analysis to categorize the data into themes. The study is mainly inductive; I rely on the data to situate the most relevant theories. I also follow the feminist methodological tradition, which constructs knowledge as situated in its own social context (Haraway 1988). Throughout the research process, I tried to address the power imbalance inherent in the traditional researcher – participant relationship in different ways. Before the interview, I provided my participants with a consent form that specified their right to withdraw from the study at any time and informed them about the use of a recording device exclusively for the purpose of transcription. One participant chose to withdraw from the research before the interview took place, as he was afraid that the information might be “leaked out” (sic) and reach his family. Aside from this one case, I obtained consent from all other interview candidates to present their narratives in this study. Some recorded data was expunged at the request of the

participants. During the translation phase, the interviewees were consulted for accuracy and to provide clarification. Participants’ names in this article are pseudonyms.

## Constructing Normative Queerness

Discourses based on essentialism and homonormativity prevailed in the interviews, particularly when my participants discussed the *discovery* of their “queerness.” Many pointed back to their childhood when they “already” felt different, suggesting a self-discovery narrative. Most homosexual interviewees reported having gone through a long process of trying to make sense of their sexual preference, ensuring that it was not just “a phase.” Consequently, they only began to take on a gay/lesbian identity as young adults, usually when they were in high school or university. Sometimes the realization turned into denial, and some tried to suppress their sexual preference and “train” themselves toward heterosexuality:

LAM (gay, 23): I started watching porn around 7th grade. I watched gay, straight, and lesbian porn, but I ignored the fact that I preferred seeing the guy [...] I even said to myself, as everybody else did, “gayness can be changed, it takes practice.” [...] Then I started practicing by ignoring all the gay or straight porn and tried watching only the lesbian porn (laugh) logical enough! What I thought was at least I could practice to be a bisexual, so that life would be easier. I practiced getting turned on by women, concentrated on the women only, and my thought was “I’m not 16 yet, I can change,” and then after 16, “I’m not 18 yet, there’s still hope.”

Taking time to confirm one’s sexuality and resisting sexual desires are undoubtedly reactions to the widespread cultural notion of homosexuality as a sinful choice or a temporary Western-oriented lifestyle (Phạm 2013; Weber 2012). Such discourse delegitimizes homosexuality by char-

6 Information Connecting Sharing (ICS) is a Vietnamese LGBT activist organization.

acterizing it as a spontaneous, chaotic attraction. The common reaction against this stigmatizing construction would be to “slide to the opposite extreme: they assert that there is something real about their identity, and then try to locate that felt reality in their genes, or their earliest experience, or their mystical nature” (Epstein 1987, 25). These interviewees establish the “truth of sex” by showing evidence that their sexual identity is essential, consistent from birth, and unchangeable despite “training” and practices. “Nature” is in fact a word they frequently used when conceptualizing their sexual or gender identity.

Writing about lesbians and the coming-out experience, Barbara Ponse (1978) discusses the human effort to construct consistency in a narrative, describing it as a form of identity work. Through this performance, individuals create a coherent interpretation of their identities. I argue that the effort to strive for consistency when constructing a homosexual identity is intricately tied to essentialism and homonormativity: Both ideologies are used to construct and reinforce the consistent gay/lesbian narrative. This leads the subjects to not only believe in the “nature” of their sexuality but also to direct their behaviours in such a way that aligns their sexual desire with their respective gender and gender expression:

VINH (23, gay man): A masculine man is better than a feminine man, so I just fix myself a little bit. It's really not a big deal. It helps my self-image to become a bit closer to perfection [...] I try to adjust my behaviours to be more compatible with my physical body. *I am a man so I have to look like a man.* (my emphasis)

QUANG (21, gay man): Sometimes when I feel overly excited I tend to express my emotions freely, which makes me appear feminine. But most of the time I manage to control myself and act in a masculine manner.

Throughout the interviews, the homosexual men repeatedly emphasized that ideas concerning masculinity were central to their identity construction. Some shared that they needed to “police” their own gestures and behaviours to maintain a masculine representation. For these interviewees, masculinity is a means to draw boundaries between a gay man and a transgender woman. Accordingly, the notion that a man needs to look masculine serves to maintain gender normativity and to shape modes of gender expression. As Duggan (2003) argues, homonormativity functions by upholding heteronormativity and gender role institutions. In this case, public acceptance for these gay men is a form of reward for their conformity to these institutions.

Romantic relationships, which are intimately linked to the participants' self-perceptions, constitute another venue for understanding these interviewees' conformity to homonormativity. For instance, while discussing gender roles in a gay relationship, my interviewee Vinh insisted that whether a gay man can be a “top” or a “bottom” depends on his “natural instinct.” These terms, originating in the English language, have been slightly shifted in Vietnamese gay culture to refer to sexual roles, gender roles, or both. Although Vinh reinforced the notion that “[he is] a man” and must be “masculine,” in the same interview he also asserted that masculinity for him was a work in progress. Vinh differentiated himself from the gay men that were “born to be” dominant, who he believed would be more superior to act as a top. He shared with me his experience from one of his past relationships in which he tried the top/dominant role and failed because he was not a *top thuần chủng* [a thoroughbred top, a pure top]:

VINH (23, gay man): There are gay men who switch from “bottom” to “top” as they grow older and become more mature. But the relationship which constitutes a bottom and bot-to-top is not

ideal. That bot-to-top person will never be as good as a thoroughbred top. They won't be able to control their relationships, they're not strong enough to be its cornerstone.

Vinh's answers reveal the ultimate paradox of homonormativity, in which some gay men are expected to be masculine and to conform to gender roles while at the same time submitting to the "role of the female" in their relationship. His characterization of certain gay men as being born to be "thoroughbred tops" indicates that gender can only be naturally granted, which taken alone is an essentialist stance. Simultaneously, however, Vinh's effort to "correct" his behaviours seems to indicate a work in progress toward the alignment of sex, gender identity, and gender expression. Under this homonormative framework, Vinh's effort to work on his masculinity becomes a never-ending pursuit. He can be masculine, but never masculine enough. As another interviewee, Lam, put it: "[as a gay guy], you can never be too masculine, only too feminine."

Another interview revealed the paradoxical position of reproducing heterosexual norms in a gay relationship:

NAM (26, gay man): I am the husband in my relationship because I am older and also more mature. I usually just call [my boyfriend] *gâu* or *cúc cưng* [Vietnamese terms of endearment]. It is okay if he refers to me as his "husband," but I cannot refer to him as my "husband." It's strange, isn't it? I wouldn't call him my "wife" either.

Nam revealed that the term "husband" was reserved for only one person in his relationship. As his age and maturity granted him the husband status, his partner could not use the same label. Worth noting is that this couple rejects the "wife" label, which has an association with femaleness. In this interview, homonormativity resurfaces

through the emphasis that a monogamous relationship consists of one dominant partner (the husband) and the other one who is relatively subordinate (the nonhusband-nonwife). This seems to also mirror the larger Vietnamese culture that embraces the Confucian gender order in which the man is considered the dominant figure in the relationship.

In a similar fashion to the males in the homosexual community, the female interviewees divide the lesbian population into two basic groups: butch (or soft-butch)<sup>7</sup> and femme. These terms, developed in Western discourse, are initially used as categories to define gender expression and styles; "butch" refers to a woman with a "tomboy" appearance, while "femme" refers to a feminine woman. However, throughout the interviews these categories were treated not only as forms of gender expression but also as gender/mental roles in a relationship, which leads to an expected consistency between relationship role and gender expression:

VÂN (19, lesbian): Most soft butches in the lesbian community here try to make themselves look strong and masculine in order to fulfil the expectations coming from the femmes. Femmes want to be protected, and this makes the butches believe that if they want to get a femme, they need to be strong and masculine. They will try to act like a guy in the way they dress, in their gestures, and sometimes they engage in activities like getting a tattoo, smoking, or drinking [...] to attract femmes.

Vân noted that the tendency to "butch up" did not necessarily come from individual preferences;

7 In the interviews, the two terms "butch" and "soft-butch" were used interchangeably. My informants either used the direct English terms or the equivalent Vietnamese-localized pronunciations of the English terms (butch = bi; soft butch = *sec bi*; femme = *phem*) to refer to lesbian roles/expressions.

rather it was used as a strategy for attracting femme partners. The attraction of opposites seems to be the unquestioned assumption in the search for potential partners: masculinity (butch) attracts femininity (femme) and vice versa, and gender expression is translated into a binary relationship model in which one becomes the protector/giver and the other the protected/receiver. It is worth noting that attraction of opposites reflects the Taoist construction of romantic relationships as the merging of opposite forms of energy (Yin and Yang). Through the dramatization of gender roles in their relationships, these individuals perpetuate the Vietnamese society's version of gender dichotomy, which characterizes masculinity and femininity as mutually exclusive rigid categories. Homonormativity is at work through the replication of gender dichotomy as well as through the alignment of role (protector or protected) with gender expression (masculine or feminine). Consequently, the idea of dating a person who expresses gender in a similar (rather than opposing) manner seems absurd for some interviewees:

ME: Would you date a girl who has a masculine appearance?

HOA (21, lesbian): Probably not (laugh). That would feel like two "dudes" getting together!

SEN (21, lesbian): Nah, it would be weird!

At the time of the interview, Hoa and Sen were both in monogamous relationships with partners whom they described as "very feminine." Hoa described herself as someone with "a strong personality," and she adopted the "strong protector" role in her relationship. Sen confirmed the notion: because they were strong and masculine, their girlfriends should be the *bánh bò vô dụng* (the literal translation is "useless cupcake"; the meaning is similar to "damsel in distress"). Their language clearly reflects the "gender" assigned to each

"type of lesbian": while their feminine girlfriends are the "damsel," the strong, masculine lesbian is considered a "dude." The commitment to seek the appropriate type of partner, once again, reflects the conformity to the Confucian gender order of a masculine dominant figure and a feminine submissive figure:

CHI (19, lesbian): [Some lesbians] are obsessed with these categories to the point that the question [are you butch or femme] is always brought up when someone approaches me. I just say I don't use those labels, I am just a lesbian, and somehow that pushes them away. It seems like they need these labels to know whether I belong to the category that they think they can pursue.

Romantic relationships that follow an essentialist and homonormative framework inadvertently become rigid and fixed into a model that mirrors the local gender dichotomy and gender hierarchy influenced by the Three Teachings. Identities conceptualized as essential seem to lose the power to fluctuate and flexibly change: as evidenced, some female homosexuals fixated on labels and therefore could not imagine dating other lesbians without knowing their "types." Similarly, Vinh perceived the bot-to-top gay man as "not the real deal," incapable of sustaining a long-term relationship. Here, I second Foucault's (1984, 166) argument that classification may provide a space for people to find new pleasures and relationships, but it should not become the "code of existence." When it does, a person seeking liberation may escape one rigid way of life only to find themselves in another reality that is no less entrapping.

## Social Positions of Bisexual and Transgender People in the Community

In the previous section, I have shown how the Vietnamese queer youth community's use of es-



sentialism and homonormativity influences how they structure their identities and relationships. From the interviews it is clear that essentialist discourse provides a way for these young people to reify their gender/sexuality and turn stigma into identity. However, this emphasis on “nature” also constructs some identities as less worthy of acceptance than others. For instance, some interviewees expressed overwhelming prejudice against transgender people, whose bodies seemed to evoke feelings of unease due to their ambiguity and incoherence. These bodies are depicted as “unnatural” and worthy of contempt, and are constantly subjected to contestations from gay men:

NAM (26, gay man): I’m okay with trans-women who could make themselves look completely like a girl when they go out. But if they do it halfway [...] it would be very weird.

ME: What if they can’t afford to change their appearance all the way?

NAM: Then just stay home, why do they have to go out? Everybody would look at them if they go out, and that is weird [...] Even I, as a member of this [LGBT] community, feel annoyed by that image, then how can we expect acceptance from the public? [...] When they look into the mirror, *can’t they tell that it just looks very wrong?* (my emphasis)

Nam later argued that in a different context, such as in Thailand, the ambiguous transgendered bodies would be acceptable. However, in the Vietnamese context, he found these bodies appalling and not entitled to be visible. His statement reflects the notion that bodies and identities are, in a close and complex manner, tied to the society in which they are made to be understood (Moi 2001). When criticizing these bodies, some participants made use of essentialist discourse, such as “half way,” “unnatural,” or simply plain “wrong,” reinforcing the homonormative notion

that gender-ambiguous bodies are inferior to the gender-normative ones. These interviewees tended to emphasize the need for transgender people to re-establish the consistency between their mind (gender) and body (sex) through sex-change reassignment:

VINH (23, gay man): [If a transgender person already goes through sex reassignment surgery] then it is fine, because then their body and their gender expression will match. I hate to see people with male bodies wearing make-up or dressing in women’s clothes, it makes them look weak and unnatural [...] The public tends to think that gay men and trans-women are the same group, so [when trans-women act and dress femininely] it ruins the image of gay men and makes it harder for people to accept us.

In this interview, the demand for consistency between sex and gender is revealing. Vinh’s statement reflects how homonormativity and essentialism work in the individual’s worldview to “police” gender expression and evaluate certain bodies as inferior. While this informant argued for sex-reassignment surgery as a solution to make the transgender bodies “natural” again, another interviewee held a different opinion:

SEN (21, lesbian): I am against [sex-change] surgery [...] I think that you are born in this body and you should accept it, you need to respect your original body. I think people undergo sex reassignment surgery because their sex drive is too high.

In a different manner, this quote also reflects how subscribing to an essentialist stance inclines one to marginalize the transgender community. Emphasizing that the body should be honoured in its original state, Sen described the decision to undergo sex-change reassignment as a lack of respect for the body and legitimized her disapproval of it. She also held one’s sexual drive to

be the root cause of seeking this type of surgery, a cause that she did not see as justifying the action. This seems to echo the Buddhist emphasis on letting go of attachments, and the portrayal of the pursuit of sexual desires as vain and immoral. However, there is an inconsistency in how these cultural norms are applied. For instance, the same interviewee does not view this kind of pursuit as unethical in the context of a heterosexual or homosexual relationship.

While surgically unaltered transgender people are stigmatized due to their gender-ambiguous appearance, the interviews also revealed a clear bias against bisexual people. My bisexual participants shared that they often needed to hide their sexuality from the queer community:

KIM (24, bisexual woman): When talking to lesbian, gay, and transgender people, I express mostly my homosexual side. I avoid talking about my boyfriend. I feel that telling them about this relationship would cause me to feel alienated.

Writing about the representation of bisexuality in American contemporary screen culture, San Filippo (2013) asserts that bisexuality causes a direct threat toward heteronormativity. She connects homonormativity with James' concept (1996) of "compulsory monosexuality," the notion that a person can only be attracted to one sex. Under the institution of monosexuality, both heterosexuality and homosexuality are recognized as legitimate and sustainable attractions, while bisexuality is subjected to contestation, scepticism, and prejudice:

QUANG (21, gay man): I don't really support the term "bisexual" because some people use it as a shield, because they don't have the guts to say that they are gay or lesbian. They call themselves bisexual because they believe it is more socially acceptable than to say they are homosexual.

As Callis (2009) notes, bisexuality is an identity that cannot be performed in monogamous cultures due to the lack of a bisexual action. Being in a relationship at a given time labels a person as either "homosexual" or "heterosexual," thus rendering bisexuals invisible. This invisibility contributes to the widespread notion that bisexuality does not exist. Studying a Vietnamese queer support group located in California, Masequesmay (2003) found that the bisexual members of the group were characterized by the lesbian members as "confused." This led these bisexual members to suppress their interest towards men to not be seen as betraying their "lesbian sisters." My interview materials suggest that in Vietnam, bisexuals are not only suspected and judged, but derided and ostracized as well:

HUY (19, bisexual man): I was chatting with this gay guy, I told him that I am bisexual. He then started sending me messages saying that I am such a slut, like why do I have to like both guys and girls, why can't I just stick to liking guys [...] Sometimes I'm really scared of gay men (laugh), that's why later I just told them that I'm gay so they will stop insulting me.

Previous studies in the context of the U.S. (Eliason 2000) and the UK (Anderson, McCormack & Ripley 2013) have found similar stereotypes attached to the bisexual identity, in which case bisexual people are viewed as perverted, nonmonogamous, unable to commit, and obsessed with sex. The definition of bisexuality as having attraction to both men and women consequently forms the stereotypes that bisexuals are untrustworthy and unpredictable partners who need to date both sexes simultaneously (McLean 2008). This sentiment is echoed in Nam's interview material:

NAM (26, gay man): They [bisexuals] are greedy. So in general we [gay people] don't hang out with them. [...] If I date a bisexual guy, one day I have to fight with a cupcake [a girl] over him, that would

be so weird, so insulting, so wrong, you know, so if he likes cupcakes just stick to cupcakes.

Nam's refusal to date or even hang out with bisexuals stemmed from these stereotypes: he foresaw an inevitable cat fight with the "cupcakes" in order to win over a nonmonogamous, noncommitted bisexual man, a risk he wanted to avoid. Similarly, other interviewees felt that having a bisexual partner would be problematic. One interviewee drew the following connection between sexual orientation and personality:

SEN (21, lesbian): I think bisexual people are very prone to changing their partners, because their mind goes into two directions, they could have homosexual and heterosexual feelings, so their mind will always change. They are very likely to cheat.

Sen characterized the bisexual mind as "[going] into two directions" and "prone to change," assuming that an essential split in personality accounted for bisexuals' attraction to both men and women. Through essentialist discourse, Sen justified her decision not to date bisexuals by constructing them as naturally unreliable partners, claiming the moral inferiority of bisexuals. This line of reasoning also reveals that bisexuality is an identity that cannot be understood within a culture that emphasizes gender dichotomy, as bisexuals' desire for both sexes violates this dichotomous characterization of gender.

All together, these interviews reveal the inferior statuses of transgender and bisexual people in the Vietnamese queer youth community, which can be seen as a sign of a lack of solidarity between different queer groups. Chi, a blogger-activist from the lesbian community, discussed this lack of solidarity in a rather depressing tone:

CHI (19, lesbian): They [gay men] still call us [lesbians] "useless cupcake" or call other gay people

"cupcake" as an insult. If we don't address gender inequality and discrimination against women, there will always be this gap between gay men and lesbians [...] We don't know anything about [the other groups] in this community.

Throughout the interview, Chi critically examined LGBT activism in Vietnam, which she believed had created a "bubble of illusion" about social change. While this activism emphasizes the need to ensure equality for queer people and to promote diversity, in Vietnam it has not successfully addressed what Chi believed to be the "bigger problem," that is, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and misogyny, leading to many divisions within the queer community. While Chi addressed this lack of solidarity with a sense of urgency, another activist viewed it as inevitable:

HIẾU (23, trans-man): Separation takes place in all communities. In a country there is always the rich/poor division, and in a city like Saigon there is separation between people with different professions. For example, a banker may look down on a street sweeper, not all, but some of them would. The queer community is the same; it is itself a society and it carries the trace of any society in which some members would look down on the others.

Here, the existence of a hierarchy within the queer community was acknowledged but also left unchallenged. Hiếu did not see the lack of solidarity as a sign of problems, but rather as an inevitable manifestation of a smaller culture carrying the trace of a larger culture. This attitude explains how certain norms of the heteronormative, patriarchal, class society of Vietnam can penetrate into the queer community and even help to reinforce marginalization in an already marginalized community. In this hierarchy, the queer groups most marginalized are those whose identities provoke and dispute the validity of heteronormativity and an epistemological standpoint, which interprets gender and sexuality

through an essentialist dichotomy. LGBT activism that focuses on sustaining heteronormative institutions, therefore, contributes to the positioning of transgender people and bisexuals at the fringe of the queer community, and constructs these identities as nonnormative queers.

## The Queer Field and Cosmopolitanism

In the previous sections, I have discussed the formation of a social hierarchy in the Vietnamese queer youth community based on subscribing to homonormativity and essentialism. This hierarchy is shaped not only by gender and sexual norms but also by values related to consumerism, class and cosmopolitanism. My male homosexual interviewees especially emphasized these values; for instance, one interviewee described the Vietnamese public's prejudice against queerness as "behind the times" and "uncivilized":

VINH (23, gay man): In a way I actually look down on those people. I feel sorry for them; they are so behind the times, so slow, so uncivilized, so lacking the light of enlightenment, you know.

Vinh constructed a dichotomy between himself and the Vietnamese public, an "Us versus Them" model, in which "Them" were presented as having an outdated, inferior mode of thinking. For Vinh, his queerness occupied a legitimate space in the world of modernity and civilization, to the extent that those who failed to acknowledge this legitimacy were simply fools and deserved his pity. He characterized the respect for queerness as a product of modernity, of intellectual advancement, and as a *cultured* property. Against this discourse, Vinh positioned the Vietnamese public as archaic, benighted, and lacking awareness.

Vinh's statement exposes how acceptance and support for queerness is increasingly featured as

an indication of a developed society. In the context of UK's urban space, the celebration of gay culture is central to constructing an attractive, competitive image of cultural inclusion and cosmopolitanism (Bell & Binnie 2004). However, many research studies have shown that the politics of exclusion remain a feature of these spaces: middle-class dispositions, coupled with notions of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, all intertwine in the construction of contemporary gay representation and sexualized space (Binnie & Skeggs 2004; Peters 2011). Inscribed with upper-middle class dispositions, the mainstream, marketable gay image is painted with, to use Vinh's words, "romance, beauty, and sophistication" – cultural qualities that become attached to the gay identity. Indeed, the pressure to be "pretty" and "sophisticated" was commonly expressed by the gay interviewees in this study. This emphasis reflects the dichotomous characterization of queer cultural spaces versus other spaces: while the queer space is advertised as a "promise of visibility, eroticism, cosmopolitanism, and consumption" (Rooke 2007, 241), the other spaces are depicted as rigid, noncosmopolitan, and unfashionable:

NAM (26, gay): In our community there is the standard – "if you are gay you must be pretty." Kinda sad to think about it. A lot of people say they don't mind the appearance, [laugh] don't trust them: they are lying through their teeth! When we go outside, we always have to take care of our appearance, or else people will judge us. It is okay for a straight guy to be ugly, but not so for a gay guy.

Another interviewee, Lam, confirmed this standard. He discussed the high expense to maintain his gym membership and to afford cosmetic products and clothes from well-known brands. Additionally, he learned to keep up with fashion and hairstyle trends. These habits were necessary for him to maintain a desirable appearance and to "blend in" in the Vietnamese gay community.

The emphasis on maintaining “the right body” with “the right fashion” echoes both Bourdieu’s (1984) and Skeggs’ (1997) observation on how the body communicates the status of class. Skeggs (ibid., 84) writes the following:

[B]odily dimensions (volume, height, weight), bodily shapes (round or square, stiff or supple, straight or curved) and bodily forms (expressed through treating it, caring for it, feeding it, and maintaining it) reveal the deepest dispositions of class, gender and race [...] The surface of the bodies is the site upon which distinctions can be drawn.

In other words, these interviewees’ efforts to maintain a desirable appearance show that appearance is intertwined with social status in their field. It also shows how class has been incorporated into the Vietnamese gay habitus, requiring those wishing to adhere to it to possess both economic and cultural capital to maintain the right appearance. This helps them to earn legitimation from their fellow friends and to attract potential partners. Yet, such operations happen so subtly that class is disguised simply as styles, reinforcing the notion that some just happen to possess a better, more accurate taste than others. Rooke’s (2007) study demonstrated how class was used to conceal the performative, temporary nature of the lesbian habitus. Observing social interactions at a lesbian bar, she noted that some of the guests “embodied a lesbian aesthetic without seemingly having to even try,” while her working-class informants had to actively change their appearance to be “coded with any value in this field of practice” (Rooke 2007, 243–246). As the standards for beauty, attraction, and desire are narrowly defined by the practices of and the maintenance of class differences, certain identities will hold classed advantages when participating in the queer field, while the others will be considered wrong, unattractive, or undesirable. In my study, some inter-

viewees relied on this very notion to justify how they distanced themselves from queers who failed to conform to these standards:

VINH (23, gay): I feel that [some gay people] create a very bad image for this community. Like in the way they dress, it’s a bit too flashy, too colourful, and they overuse the accessories. It just looks anti-fashion [...] They can wear expensive clothes but still look very cheap.

In her book *Class, Self, Culture*, Beverly Skeggs (2004) specifies some of the ways in which the working class is represented in the UK media. These representations include stereotypes such as waste, excess, dangerous, lacking taste, unmodern, and lack of shame. Skeggs argues that the power to represent and encode the working class as lacking value reinforces the notion that cultural capital is the purview of the middle class. This is intertwined with the belief that aesthetic taste is intrinsic to certain (classed) identities rather than something that can be acquired over time. This turns cultural capital into *symbolic capital* which is “unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence” (Bourdieu 1986, 49), blurring the line between aptitude and acquisition. By depicting some gay people as dressing “excessively” and therefore looking “cheap”, Vinh helped reinforce a set of standards that legitimize and perpetuate the tastes stemming from his middle-class background. His statement also shows that taste is not simply about economic capital but rather about the cultural knowledge to discern which bodies and presentations are culturally desirable. The combination of class and gender/sexuality standards creates a queer aesthetic cultural image that includes an ideal-shaped body, impeccable taste, and cultivated consumption practices that set one apart from others (Rooke 2007). Lam clearly states this:

LAM (23, gay man): Being gay, you have to do two jobs at once: being masculine and being sophisti-

cated. You would need to have a taste in fashion, wine, cuisine [...] There's this saying: "Act like a straight man, dress like a gay man."

Resembling Bourdieu's (1986) discussion on cultural capital, the above statement attributes a certain style and manner to the formation of the desired gay cultural image. On one side of the coin, there is masculinity, which requires the person to conform to gender norms. On the other side, there is the possession of cultural capital, deeply internalized qualities that are linked to a culture of consumerism while treated as being essential in nature. Lam's words are also in concordance with Valocchi's (1999, 220) observation that the meaning of the gay identity has been shifted "from a political category [...] to a consumer category." Central to this historical process is the role of the neoliberal market, which recognizes the gay identity as a profitable label to attract an emerging segment of consumers. The commodification prospect of this same identity is extended to the Western mainstream media through television networks that aim at queer viewers, who actively look for representations of queers onscreen as guidance for their own construction of self-images and identities (Peters 2011). As "queer" is constructed in these shows within the framework of neoliberal consumerism, this effectively leads to the increasing marginalization of other queer groups that are not white, middle-class, or gender normative (ibid.).

This discussion on the construction of queerness in Western mainstream media is particularly relevant to the case of contemporary Vietnamese queer youth, who were born after the *Đổi Mới* [New Change] Reform in 1986. They grew up at a time when foreign media content began to appear on national television networks. Nguyễn (2015) contends that this change in the social and cultural atmosphere has led to a rupture in values between the former Vietnamese youth

culture, which stressed obedience and collectivism, and the latter that prioritizes individualism and consumerism. This effectively has led to the emergence of a Vietnamese teen population, "a distinct social group that had its own language, fashion, value systems, and role models" (Nguyễn 2015, 17). This dramatic shift explains the responsiveness of Vietnamese queer youth to Western discourses and knowledge regarding nonnormative gender/sexual identities. Evidence for this receptiveness is my interviewees' use of the acronym LGBT, rather than the local terms, for self-identification. They also prefer using Western discourses related to sex/gender that come from LGBT activism, making meaningful distinctions between "sexed body," "gender identity," and "sexuality." Such distinctions were not referenced in the traditional Vietnamese conceptualization of *giới* [sex/gender], which my interviewees believed to be problematic. In addition, the bias in the native media explains the receptivity of Vietnamese queer youth to Western mainstream media's representations of queers. As a group, my interviewees were sceptical of Vietnamese movies featuring queers: Huy (bisexual man) critiqued *Lạc Giới* (2014) for its characterization of bisexuality as a person being in relationships with both sexes simultaneously, while Chi (lesbian) was furious after watching *Đề Hôi Tính* (2014) because it stigmatized transgender women as sexual perverts. Their understanding of queerness and the queer image they identify with have then been more influenced by Western mainstream media:

LAM (23, gay man): I remember watching I Love You Phillip Morris and [the characters] mentioned that there are things that go along well - gayness and a luxury lifestyle.

It is also in these same representations that values of class and consumerism, as products of the neoliberal market ideology, are written into their

construction of the queer identity. This construct of queerness creates a dichotomy between the “acceptable” queers, deemed as valuable citizens, and those who are viewed as “spoiling” the queer community. In this field, the use of symbolic capital sustains the economic and cultural distinctions among queers from different class backgrounds. The Vietnamese queer field, therefore, carries not only norms of gender and sexuality but also class norms. Through an intertwining of these, an image of cosmopolitan queer normativity is created, while the pressure to adhere to these norms explains the lack of solidarity inside this field.

## Conclusion

In this article, I address how young Vietnamese queers conceptualize their identities and social relationships. The findings suggest that these subjects construct their queerness as natural and unchangeable, while at the same time adhering to gender norms and heteronormative institutions to legitimize their social status. They adopt and embrace a binary relationship model that echoes the Vietnamese heteronormative gender order, sustaining the gender norms of a national culture shaped by the Three Teachings. The interview data also show a tendency to appeal to norms related to class and consumerism, which altogether creates a queer field informed by homonormativity. In this field, queers who are gender-normative, middle-classed, and monosexual are considered the cultural ideal. As a consequence, a social hierarchy is created in which these homonormative queers are positioned at the top, where they can legitimize their prejudice against other subgroups in the queer community.

This article includes a critique of the type of social activism which upholds rather than resists the values of dominant institutions. In the Vietnamese context, LGBT activism that relies on

essentialism and homonormativity as the main strategy for acceptance does not in any way address structural problems found in heteronormative institutions. Rather, it sustains the notion that only identities considered natural and normative are worthy of respect and recognition. This endorsement of homonormativity and essentialism leads to the marginalization of queer populations whose identities do not conform to these normative ideals, such as transgender or bisexual people, from a political cause that, in principle, aims toward diversity and inclusion.

This article contributes to the wider research on gender, sexuality, and social relations in societies with a history of being colonized by Western empires (see Benedicto 2015; Legg & Roy 2013; Shah 2015). In Vietnam, such a history plays a significant role in shaping the nation’s youth cultures, explaining how Vietnamese youth are receptive to Western knowledge and discourse, and how they adopt these discourses to conceptualize their identities and guide their activism. However, the process entails a rejection of prevailing cultural values and furthers the notion that traditional knowledge, culture and definitions such as *giới* is inferior to Western knowledge on gender and sexuality. The findings of this study demonstrate that identity politics can be used as a vehicle for social change, economic action, and cultural imperialism, as well as for managing identities through the politics of exclusion.

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