Subjects-*in-becoming*:

Theorizing sexual subjectivities of young, unmarried women from Hồ Chí Minh City, Vietnam

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores sexual subjectivities of young, unmarried, middle-class women (aged 23-30) from Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC), Vietnam. Young Vietnamese women's experiences of sexuality have become increasingly complex in post-*Đổi Mới* Vietnam (after 1986). They have had to learn to negotiate a complex set of sociocultural values such as neo-Confucian ethics, the postsocialist government's nationalist agenda and, more recently, neoliberal values and consumer culture. While globalization and economic development has turned HCMC into a cosmopolitan space that promises alternative lifestyles, urban middle-class women's sexuality continues to be governed by a range of *traditional* discourses and their associated expectations.

In this thesis, I argue that sexual subjectivities should be understood as processes of *becoming* in ways that are attentive to a politics of location (Rich 1986). Further developing Bao's (2018) understanding of subject positions, I coin the concept *sexual subject(s)-in-becoming* to account for the ways in which young women continuously negotiate competing discourses on sex, sexuality, and gender in their everyday lives. Drawing on postcolonial feminist writings, queer theory, and a feminist narrative approach, this study sheds light on the complexity, fluidity, and situatedness of women's (hetero)sexuality in the postcolonial, postsocialist, and neoliberal nation-state of Vietnam. I explore young women's sexual subjectivities through their own narratives of sexual experiences, the context in which the stories are situated, and the interconnections between subjective experiences and the broader historical, sociocultural, and political landscape of Vietnam. To do so, I employ a feminist narrative approach, for which narrative interviews with nine young women were conducted online from Vienna, Austria.

While this study focuses on young, unmarried, middle-class women from urban HCMC, I argue that the concept *sexual subject(s)-in-becoming* is productive for an understanding of

sexual subjectivities beyond the immediate context of Vietnam, contributing to the literature on sex, sexuality, and gender in Asia. In attending to the situatedness of the subject, the thesis seeks to advance studies that take Asia as a point of reference and thus contribute to the development of "Asia as method" that Chen (2010) advocates, as well as responds to Connell's (2014) call for more theorization from the Global South. Methodologically, this study contributes to the development of a feminist narrative approach to researching sexuality in Asian contexts. Various tactics of care and strategies of listening in conducting research on sensitive and difficult topics are discussed, which can be further employed in future studies on sex, sexuality, and gender in Vietnam in particular, and other Asian contexts more broadly.

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This thesis would have not been possible without all your love and kindness.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no material accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no material previously written accepted and/or published by another person, except where an appropriate acknowledgement is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

Body of the thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 29,952

Entire manuscript: 35,622

Signed: Nguyen Thi Thanh Nha

Trigger warning

As parts of my feminist practice of care (Ahmed 2015; Clare 2017), I wish to provide a warning on the potentially triggering content of this thesis. Parts of this thesis deals with issues of (sexual) violence and contains narratives of sexual harassment, assault, and rape. Detailed accounts of embodied and affective experiences of violence will be discussed in Chapter 4. Other accounts of everyday violence, such as surveillance, censorship, habitual shaming, will also be discussed throughout the thesis, which might be triggering for those who have had similar experiences. The purpose of this warning is not to shield readers away from issues from violence, but to facilitate a better entrance into the discussion of such issues.

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Chapter 1: Subjects in context

> [M]y mother revealed a big secret: that I was actually made of porcelain. Statues, plates and cups made from porcelain come in hues of blue, light green, even brown. But they mustn't be allowed to crack, because if they do they will be thrown onto the rubbish dump or used as tombstone ornaments. My mother said I would never crack as long as I kept my virginity.
>
> (Utami 2005 [1998], 118)

When I came across Indonesian novelist Ayu Utami's novel *Saman*, this short excerpt captured my mind and brought back memories of *home* in ways that I never expected it to. Writing on the context of postcolonial Indonesia, Utami illustrates the complexities of women's sexuality in her fictive text, many aspects of which resemble the Vietnamese sociocultural and ideological mandate on sexual purity for unmarried women. Utami's prose on virginity here reminds me of the teachings I had heard and seen so often when growing up in Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC) – enough for it to sow seeds in my mind. In Vietnam, we (also) use analogy to talk about virginity, referring to the hymen as "*cái ngàn vàng*" [the golden thing]. The message is akin: we are worthless if we lose our virginity outside of wedlock. What has been so powerful about this discursive construction of virginity is its affect, through which it claws the mind and body of the subject. [1]

In the context of post-*Đổi Mới* Vietnam, the experience of sexuality for young women in Vietnam has become increasingly complex.[2] While neo-Confucian ethics that advocate sexual purity before marriage still circulate among families, the socialist government has

[1] My use of "affect" in this thesis is informed by the work of Ahmed (2014) and Tomkins (2008), which is discussed in Chapter 4.

[2] *Đổi Mới*, implemented in 1986 (translated as reform period), refers to Vietnam's shift from a centrally planned socialist economy to a market-based economy. *Đổi Mới* also ushered in a number of sociocultural changes, through which Vietnam became increasingly influenced by the global economy, fashions, foreign media and values.

leveraged several aspects of Confucianism in its construction of a new femininity (Werner 2009). Urban middle-class women are expected to be virtuous, (sexually) reserved, and diligent in their roles as mothers, wives, and daughters. Investigating the self-making process of urban middle-class women, Leshkowich (2012, 95) argues that the central dilemma with which these women have to negotiate is to present themselves "in modern, attractive ways […] avoiding displays that might seem decadent, crass, or inappropriate", while navigating the anxiety brought about by the new market economy and its associated freedoms and constraints. As such, young women have had to learn to negotiate a set of conflicting sociocultural values including neo-Confucian ethics, the postsocialist government's nationalist agenda and, more recently, neoliberal values and consumer culture. While globalization and economic development has turned HCMC into a cosmopolitan space that promises alternative lifestyles, urban middle-class women's sexuality continues to be governed by a range of *traditional* discourses and its associated expectation. Sexuality is still largely considered a taboo subject and premarital sex is viewed as immoral for women; any (sexual) experiences that transgress these social norms on sexual purity are socially and affectively condemned.

Aim and approach

Given the above-mentioned challenges, this thesis explores sexual subjectivities of young, unmarried, middle-class women (aged 23-30 years old) from HCMC. The thesis explores young women's sexual subjectivities through women's narratives of their sexual experiences, the context in which the stories are situated, and the interconnections between subjective experiences and the broader historical, sociocultural, and political landscape of Vietnam. In doing so, I demonstrate that sexual subjectivities can be understood as processes of *becoming* that are evident in the way young women continuously negotiate competing discourses on sex, sexuality, and gender in their everyday lives. The concept *sexual subject(s)*-

in-becoming is thus coined to advance an understanding of subjecthood in its changing, fluid, and messy nature. Informed by a postcolonial queer feminist approach, my thesis builds upon Bao's (2018) study of politicized queer subjects in China and offers a new perspective on theorizing sexual subjectivities of Vietnamese women, contributing to the scholarship on sex, sexuality, and gender in Asia.

The purpose of this thesis is thus to shed light on the situatedness of women's (hetero)sexuality in the postcolonial, postsocialist, and neoliberal nation-state of Vietnam. In attending to the situatedness of the subject, the thesis seeks to advance *Asia* as a point of reference, and thus contribute to the development of "Asia as method" that Chen (2010) advocates (see Chapter 6). This thesis is also an attempt to respond to Connell's (2014) call for more theorization from the Global South. Connell (2014) points to the unequal knowledge production in the contemporary global context. Such inequalities are reflected through the way in which theories developed by Anglo-European scholars remain the frameworks to interpret societies, contexts, and subjects in the Global South. Rather than completely departing from Western philosophical traditions, my thesis builds upon and seeks to contribute to scholarly works in Asia, as well as extend and situate Anglo-European concepts in the context of Vietnam.

The data production for this study is guided by a feminist epistemology that accounts for situated knowledge (Haraway 1988) and a politics of location (Rich 1986). I employ a feminist narrative approach through which narrative interviews with nine young women were conducted online from Vienna, Austria (Frank 2012; Riessman 2008). Methodologically, my study contributes to a feminist narrative approach to researching sexuality in an Asian context by developing tactics of care and strategies of listening that are attentive to the temporal and spatial context of my subject(s).

I begin this chapter with a brief historical overview of Vietnam from the late 20th century with a focus on the distinct location of HCMC. This will be followed by an examination

of the scholarship on sex, sexuality, and gender in (Southeast) Asia with an emphasis on Vietnam. Constructions of femininity after *Đổi Mới* will also be examined to shed light on the existing conceptualization(s) of the network of competing discourses in Vietnamese society. In doing so, I situate my thesis within the scholarship on sex, sexuality, and gender and seek to contribute to an understanding of sexual subjectivities of women in the context of postcolonial, postsocialist, and neoliberal Vietnam that is implicated within the political context of (Southeast) Asia more broadly. Finally, I provide an overview of my thesis chapters, the main arguments of which will be briefly explained.

Vietnam from the late 20th century

A brief contextualization of the historical context of Vietnam in recent years is necessary for an understanding of the location from which my participants and I are speaking. This is a task of historicizing the subject that speaks and is spoken about in an effort to explore their spatial and temporal spaces.[3] The formation and reformation of Vietnam as a nation-state in the modern era has been shaped by the history of colonialism, warfare, economic and political turmoil over the past two millennia with neighbouring states as well as external colonial forces (Goscha 2016; Werner, Whitmore, and Dutton 2012). Due to such complexities, I choose to focus on the period of the late 20th century until present to provide more pertinent context to the subject(s) of this thesis.

In 1975, after winning the war and uniting the country, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) implemented a centrally planned economy in the whole country under the name of socialism.[4] The post-war period, especially in Southern regions, quickly came to be characterized by economic downturn, extreme poverty, and political repression (Huynh

[3] Boellstorff (2005) offers a detailed explanation of the necessity of historicization in his study of the gay and lesbian subjects in Indonesia.
[4] This system had been implemented in the North Vietnam (officially the Democratic Republic of Vietnam) since 1945.

1977). Supporters of the former Republic of South Vietnam (RSV) were labelled unpatriotic; many were sent to reeducation camps, while others sought refugee status in various countries in North America, Europe, and Australia. HCMC, previously called Sài Gòn (Saigon) by the French, faced the most repression, persecution, and confiscation as the city was the most affluent prior to 1975 (Peyvel 2021).

Within a broader global context of neoliberalization and the decline of the Soviet Bloc, in 1986 the Vietnamese government undertook a series of market-based economic reforms known as *Đổi Mới*.[5] These reforms brought about not only economic, but also political and social changes, opening space for young people to create new forms of subjectivities (see B.T. Nguyen and Thomas 2004; Nguyễn-võ 2012; Phinney 2008). Nguyễn-võ (2010) argues that since *Đổi Mới*, Vietnam has presented a hybridity of different governing techniques – neoliberal ideas of choice along with more familiar disciplining methods of arrests and incarceration – to serve the needs of the neoliberal economy, as well as the state's desire to maintain hold on political power.

While neoliberalism[6] has taken many different forms in different regions, it has been adopted in Southeast Asian countries to promote moral citizens who are responsible for building the nation's solidarity (Ong 2006). In the context of Vietnam, neoliberalism advocates self-responsible and entrepreneurial citizens who live according to the party's agenda. A good citizen is a hard-working, self-sacrificing, moral individual (N.N. Nguyen, Özçaglar-Toulouse, and Kjeldgaard 2018). Morality guided by Confucian ethics and Vietnam's socialist government is not only associated with altruism, but also the avoidance of 'social evils', which include gambling, drinking, prostitution and the consumption of pornography (Rydstrøm

[5] This political economy system is described as "market-Leninism" by London (2009), while Davies (2015) names it "state capitalism", where the government directly controls many aspects of commercial and market activity.
[6] Neoliberalism, which was originally based on a set of market-based economic policies, has now become means of state intervention into the everyday lives of its citizens (Brown 2015; Evans and Riley 2015). It serves as another force of disciplining power that encourages the subject to take up self-improving projects, while framing these acts as autonomously chosen (Gill 2008; Rose 1992).

2006). This conception and political deployment of morality, I argue, has direct implications for sex, sexuality, and gender practices in the country, which will be explored in the following sections.

The location of my research, HCMC, has a distinct history of (post)colonialism, (post)socialism, and neoliberalism. Formerly called Saigon, HCMC was a French protectorate until 1945 and had its own government supported by the U.S. until 1975. Since *Đổi Mới* (1986), HCMC has quickly became a hot bed for the economic development of the country, particularly because foreign direct investment into HCMC after the period of 10 year of socialism (1976-1986) was somewhat easier than the capital, Hanoi (Ong 2006; Nguyễn-võ 2012). This openness to global capital has also facilitated the adaptation of a distinct form of neoliberalism, as I have discussed. The speedy economic development and trading has, in turn, created a cosmopolitan space in the city. I argue that such a space has enabled transnational exchanges of political, economic, and cultural capital, which shape the practices of consumption, production and, in turn, subjectivities. Previous research on sexual culture in Tokyo, Bangkok, and HCMC (K.K. Hoang 2015; Maree 2014; Wilson 2004) sheds light on the distinctive importance of cosmopolitan cities in facilitating different practices and subcultures.

The economic flourishing of HCMC in the early 21st century was accompanied by a commercialization of the socialist past, whereby decorations, objects, and the rhetoric of socialism was made into spaces and commodities for consumption (Peyvel 2021). Drawing on Peyvel's (2021) analysis, I suggest that (post)socialism exists in the form of collective and "imagined nostalgia" (Appadurai 1996, 77) for my participants, who only have access to the socialist past through such romanticized commodification. It also serves to depoliticize contemporary subjects because access to information and memories of the past remain under the control of the state (Peyvel 2021).

Despite such economic development, the space of the city and its subjects, I argue, continue to be structured by conditions of *(post)coloniality* (Maldonado-Torres 2007).

Coloniality, as Maldonado-Torres (2007, 243) argues, refers to the patterns of power that "define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations".[7] Drawing upon this argument, I suggest that conditions of coloniality inform the way in which Vietnamese subjects continue to imagine their own subordinate positions in comparison to the supposedly politically, culturally, and technologically advanced West. Manifestations of this colonial imagination can be observed in narratives of negotiations with sex, sexuality, and gender – as I discuss in Chapter 3, 4, and 5 of this thesis.

I have thus far briefly examined the location of HCMC as a site of tension: while economic development post-*Đổi Mới* gave rise to neoliberalism and possibilities for new forms of subjectivities, the city's socialist and colonial history continues to affect the structure of such a space and its subjects. In what follows, I account for the existing English language scholarship on sex, sexuality, and gender in Vietnam, as well as that of (Southeast) Asia.

Literature review

In this section, I examine the existing scholarship on sex, sexuality, and gender in (Southeast) Asia with a focus on Vietnam in particular. Some of the most well-known and cited works on sex, sexuality, and gender in Vietnam are ethnographic research produced by Anglo-European anthropologists, the positionality of whom as well as its impact on the research are rarely reflected upon. The texts that I examine here are by no means a comprehensive list of scholarly discussions of the gender and sexual politics of the region, as such a task is both impossible and eradicates the political tension in the usage of Asia as a regional category. Rather, I aim to sketch out some connections and exchanges within the geopolitical region of

[7] Maldonado-Torres' (2007) discussion of a "coloniality of being" is partly indebted to Quijano's (2007) analysis of the coloniality of power, where he posits that colonial structure of power that repressed and reshaped the production of knowledge of the dominated continues to inform the power dynamic between European and non-European subjects in contemporary societies.

Asia while focusing on the construction of sex, sexuality, and gender in Vietnam – a body of literature to which I seek to contribute. This section is then followed by an examination of the competing discourses on femininity post-*Đổi Mới* in Vietnam.

Sex, sexuality, and gender in Vietnam

The late 20th marked the transition of many countries in Southeast Asia to independent nation-states, occupied with national development agendas and reforms. In their edited anthology, *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, Ong and Peletz (1995) analyze the construction of gender in several Southeast Asian countries during this period, shedding light on the social hierarchies within and between nation-states in the region. Bodies and sexualities, they argue, are treated as sites of political, economic, and cultural contestations and transformations in the context of postcoloniality. Within this framework, the contradictions and contentions between "poetics and politics, prestige and shame, homogeneity and heterogeneity, the dominant and the dominated, the local and the global" are negotiated (Ong and Peletz 1995, 4). Studies on sex, sexuality, and gender in the region have directed attention to the way in which this historical context influenced ideologies on (gendered) morality (e.g., Platt, Davies, and Bennett 2018; Rydstrøm 2009), the construction of gendered subjectivities (Blackwood 2010; e.g., Sinnott 2007), the mobilization of religion(s) in policing sex and sexuality (e.g., Bennett 2005), sexuality and state governance (Nguyễn-võ 2002; e.g., Suryakusuma 1996), and gendered and sexual experience of women in diaspora (e.g., L.A. Hoang and Yeoh 2014; Hilsdon and Giridharan 2008), to name a few.

There is a flourishing body of scholarship on queer lives and issues in Asia more broadly and Southeast Asia specifically that focuses on marginalized lived experiences, state policing of sexual nonconformity, and different forms of queer activism (e.g., Blackwood and Johnson 2012; Boellstorff 2005; Chiang and Wong 2016, 2017; Ho, Li, and Kam 2021; Heiman and Cao Van 1975). While this thesis does not focus on queer subjects, it nevertheless draws

on queer theory and queer scholarship of Asia (e.g., Bao 2018) to make sense of the sexual subject(s)-in-becoming, which will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

Scholarly research on gender and sexuality in Vietnam is limited. Some of the key research foci includes gender discourses in relation to the household and the state (Werner 2009; Werner and Bélanger 2002), gender practices (Drummond and Rydström 2004), women in the family (Barbiéri and Bélanger 2009; Rydstrøm 2010), women's historical, political and social status in society (Atsufumi 2016b; Barry 1996), gender and global capital in the sex industry (K.K. Hoang 2015), and new modes of (neoliberal) governance (Nguyễn-võ 2012).

Existing scholarship on sex and sexuality mostly focuses on martial relationships and violence against women in the context of marriage (see T.T. Do, Khuat, and Nguyen 2018; Kwiatkowski 2019; Le 1996; Rydstrøm 2017). Several other studies focusing on sexual practices of (young) women explore the topics of romantic love and (marital) relationships as its central tenets (see Earl 2015; P.A. Nguyen 2007; Phinney 2008; Shohet 2017; A.L. Tran 2018a). P.A. Nguyen (2007, 310), in exploring youth sexual culture in the early 2000s, argues that young people's involvement in dating is influenced both by what she terms "the grammar of romantic love" and "the grammar of the market". In other words, P.A. Nguyen (2007) sees the logics of the market and the discourse of individual love as separately and simultaneously influencing romantic pursuits. Differing from P.A. Nguyen (2007), Shohet (2017, 560) advocates for an intersectional understanding of affective bonds, which "can at once encompass nation, family, and individual love". Her ethnographic account reveals that the pursuit of marriage in contemporary Vietnam needs to be understood through the complex intertwining of *tình cảm* (sentiment)[8] and material needs (Shohet, 2017). This body of scholarship, with the exception of P.A. Nguyen's (2007) study, has not explicitly explored the relationship between romantic love, gender and sexuality of young, unmarried women. My thesis seeks to address

[8] Shohet (2017, p. 568) defines *tình cảm* as "the Vietnamese moral sentiment of care and concern for the other out of mutual affection", which is rooted in the ontological perception of selfhood as interdependent on others.

such a gap by exploring sexual subjectivities of young, unmarried women at the nexus of romantic love, gender practices, and sexuality.

There are only a handful of studies thus far that explore the romantic relationships and sexual practices of young, unmarried women. These include the work of Khuat (1998), A.D. Ngo, Ross, and Ratliff (2008), P.A. Nguyen (2007), and Quach (2008), all of which adopt different methodological approaches to the topic. Khuat Thu Hong's (1998) work is one of the earliest investigations on female sexuality and sexual practices in Vietnam. T.T. Do, Khuat, and Nguyen (2018)'s more recent study explores the sexual satisfaction of married women in relation to various factors such as ethnicity, income and sexual experience through a national survey. P.A. Nguyen (2007) conducted ethnographic work on youth sexual culture, as previously discussed; while Quach (2008) explores the sexual experiences of unmarried women in Hà Nội through interviews. Quach's (2008) findings indicate that women employ various strategies to express sexual agency and negotiate the dominant discourse of female chastity. Both T.T. Do, Khuat, and Nguyen (2018) and Quach (2008) suggest that further research is needed to better understand sexual agency and subjective sexual wellbeing from a social and cultural lens. In this thesis, I seek to take up this call by employing a feminist narrative approach to study sexual subjectivities, which takes seriously individual lived experiences in their situatedness in the historical, sociocultural, and political context of Vietnam. In what follows, I examine the existing scholarship on gender in Vietnam, focusing on the construction of femininities post-*Đổi Mới*. In doing so, I outline the way in which previous scholars theorize the competing discourses and values systems that dominate contemporary Vietnamese society and seek to situate my participants' narratives within such a complex entanglement of competing discourses.

Femininity after Đổi Mới: Competing values and discourses in Vietnam

Scholarship on identity, lifestyles, and modes of consumption in contemporary urban Vietnam highlights the historical, economic, political changes in recent decades and the different value sets associated with them (see Leshkowich 2012; Miho 2016; T.-N. Nguyen et al. 2020). Q.T.N. Nguyen (2016b, 34), for example, argues that moral education in Vietnam is informed by a complex mixture of "traditional values, Confucian and Taoist values, Buddhist values, Western values and Socialist values". Confucian and Taoism were imported to Vietnam during the Chinese colonial period (111 BCE – 938 CE), while Buddhism came during the 1st CE through trade routes. These religions are still deeply embedded in everyday life in contemporary Vietnam. Western values, Q.T.N. Nguyen (2016b) suggests, first came to the territory with the French colonizers during the late 19th century.[9] More recent research points to an increasing influence of Western values since *Đổi Mới*, which is evidenced in a growing individualistic lifestyle among young people (B.T. Nguyen and Thomas 2004; P.A. Nguyen 2007). Socialist values became prominent in Vietnam during the early 20th century when Marxist-Leninism was employed to mobilize people for anti-colonial and national liberation movements (Q.T.N. Nguyen 2016b). Interestingly, Q.T.N. Nguyen (2016b) highlights patriotism – along with several other values such as diligence, optimism, and solidarity – that have been promoted by intellectual elites as well as the Vietnamese Communist government in recent decades as *traditional* values.[10]

[9] The French colonization of Vietnam can be dated from the mid-19th century to 1954 in official documents and records; however, France's first involvement in Vietnam dated back to the early 17th century when missionaries set foot on the land (Copin 2021). The 17th and 18th century are marked by trading relationships, the arrival of French Catholic missionaries, and military support of France in the internal warfare of North and South Vietnam, some of which were deployed as justifications for French official colonial intervention from 1858 onwards. Because of such entanglements, I suggest that Anglo-European values might have come since the 17th century.

[10] I use the term "traditions" in italics to emphasize its root as a colonial construct (Burton 1999). Burton (1999) argues that the dichotomous opposition of modernity and tradition, if uncritically used, is based on the assumed narrative of Europe since the Renaissance as the initial location from which modernity was spread to the rest of the world.

Indeed, existing scholarly literature points to the continuing domination of discourses of *traditional* Vietnamese femininity, which play a pivotal role in women's (hetero)sexuality. Scholars such as Nguyễn-võ (2012), Werner (2009) and Wilcox (2000) argue that these discourses have been largely shaped by state-led cultural and political campaigns since the 1990s, which seek to tie individual woman to the family and state in various postcolonial, postsocialist, nation-building projects. The nationalist discourse on femininity, as Pettus (2004) suggests, often juxtaposes moralistic critique with economic endorsement, especially during the late 1990s and early 2000s, as the government managed the transition from a socialist to a market economy. In a similar fashion, Earl (2015) focuses on the differences between the discursive and lived experience of gender in urban Vietnam, arguing that there is a discrepancy between state discourses of womanhood and everyday life experiences. Specifically, the idea of chastity continues to hold discursive value when it comes to marriageability and women's virtue (Earl 2015; Gammeltoft and Nguyen 2015).

Looking at youth sexual culture in a boarder sense, P.A. Nguyen (2007) argues that premarital sex, unmarried cohabitation and multiple dating were emerging trends in youth sexual culture in urban Vietnam after *Đổi Mới*. Focusing on masculinity in Vietnam, Martin (2010) points to the increasingly open attitude of young men toward premarital sex in urban areas. However, P.A. Nguyen (2007) also argues that there is a continuation of 'traditional' perceptions of gender roles in which sexual chastity is expected from young women. Other studies on (parental) perceptions of premarital sex also indicate an ongoing uneven moral condemnation toward teenage girls and young women who engage in such practices (L.A.T. Do et al. 2017; M. Do and Fu 2010; Bui 2020).

Scholarship on this topic has also explored the implications of competing discourses on femininity on gender practices. For instance, my previous study on the use of social media among young Vietnamese women demonstrates the techniques of self-presentation employed to negotiate competing values, which are conceptualized as a mixture of Confucianism,

socialism, and neoliberalism (T.-N. Nguyen et al. 2020). Scholars such as Phinney (2008), Shohet (2017), and A.L. Tran (2018a) take up a different approach; rather than labeling the different discourses that exert influence on gender practices in Vietnam, they situate these discourses in the postcolonial, postsocialist, and neoliberal context. Shohet (2017) moves away from the dichotomous division of 'traditional' versus 'modern' discourses, arguing that such a binary construction is insufficient to understand the complexities of individuals' lives that are entangled with political economy and moral reasoning in contemporary Vietnam. Similarly, Phinney (2007), in tracing the genealogy of discourses of love since the early 20th century, points to the fragmented, non-linear, complex employment of notions such as romantic love, conjugal love and socialist love by women themselves.

In accordance with Leshkowich's (2012) and T.-N. Nguyen et al.'s (2020) studies, I conceptualize competing discourses on femininity as a complex entanglement of traditional values (including but not limited to neo-Confucianism), the postsocialist nationalist agenda and neoliberalism. However, it is also acknowledged that these competing discourses are inextricably intertwined with the historical and sociopolitical processes of change that Vietnam has undergone. Inspired by Phinney's (2007) and Shohet's (2017) ethnographic approaches, I define the complex entanglement of competing discourses in loose terms, aiming to locate these discourses within the participant's narratives of their own negotiation.

Chapter overview

While this chapter outlines the broader historical context in which the thesis is situated, the next chapter establishes the theoretical and methodological context. I will discuss my use of the concepts *sexual subjectivities* and *becoming*, which are informed by Bao's (2018) work on queer subjects in China. This study is underpinned by a feminist epistemology, which argues for the importance of a "politics of location" (Rich 1986). I employ a feminist narrative

methodology to conduct a series of narrative interviews with 8 participants. As I argue for an understanding of sexual subjectivities as processes of *becoming*, the remainder of my thesis is structured around narratives of *becoming*. Chapter 3 introduces the formation of the sexual subject through various pathways. In Chapter 4, I theorize the process of negotiating forces of violence as a form of subject (re)orientation. I then discuss the way in which my participants navigate their sexual subjectivities over times and imagine futurity in Chapter 5.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that sexual subjectivities of young, unmarried, middle-class Vietnamese women are underpinned by processes of *becoming*. In doing so, it examines the ways in which women negotiate competing discourses on sex, sexuality, and gender in contemporary Vietnam. Young women's narratives of sexual subjectivities are explored in the nexus of gender, class, and race that is implicated in the context of postcolonial, postsocialist, neoliberal Vietnam.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework and methodology

This chapter introduces the theoretical framing of the sexual subject and the use of a narrative approach to studying sexual subjectivities in contemporary Vietnam. My conception of the sexual subject is informed by a postcolonial queer feminist theorization. Feminist epistemology will be discussed as a methodological framework which this study will use to guide the data gathering and analysis procedures. Feminist narrative inquiry is employed as a method to explore sexual subjectivities of young Vietnamese women through narratives of their experiences, which is informed primarily by the work of Riessman (2008) and Frank (2012).The procedure of data gathering and analysis will be discussed in detail in an attempt to advance a feminist narrative approach in researching sexuality in the context of Vietnam.

Theoretical framework: Framing the subject-in-becoming

My use of the concept 'subjectivities' in this thesis is informed by Foucault's (1977, 1978, 1983) conceptualization of the subject and feminist queer theory's commitment to theorize fluidity, uncertainty, and messiness (Bao 2018; Butler 1990). In particular, I take up Foucault's theorization of the relationship between subjectivity and power-knowledge as a basis for an understanding of the sexual subject that is constituted within and by structural forces. Power-knowledge (Foucault 2003) in its hyphenated form refers to the way in which certain regimes of knowledge have authoritative power that legitimize themselves while rendering others unintelligible. In situating the subject in institutions of power-knowledge, I also seek to account for the historical, material, and affective conditions through which the subject takes shape.

Bao (2018) conceptualizes sexual subjectivity using queer theories and methodologies in his study of *tongzhi. Tongzhi* is conceptualized simultaneously as a subject position, an analytical category, as well as a political statement on forms of queer identities in contemporary

China (Bao 2018). In seeing *tongzhi* as a subject position, Bao (2018) emphasizes his decision to focus on the conditions through which different sexual subjectivities emerge, which allows him to situate *tongzhi* within the specific spatial and temporal context of neoliberal capitalist China with remnants of state socialism. The notion of *sexual subjectivities* (in its plural form) in this study is employed in Bao's (2018) terms; that is, as a form of selfhood that is embodied, historicized, and contingent on the context in which it is situated.

This study employs Bao's (2018) appropriation of the concept of "becoming" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988), which he uses to understand queer subject positions and formations in contemporary China. In Bao's (2018, 6) study, he refuses to map an ontology of queer identity; rather, he focuses on what he terms "a performative mode of queer becoming". In discussing *tongzhi* as "a mode of 'becoming'" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, cited in Bao 2018) instead of being, Bao (2018, p. 7) see it as "a subject position that one can potentially occupy, or one that can be articulated under contingent historical circumstances". Hence, Bao (2018) pays attention to the material conditions from which *tongzhi* is employed, mobilized, and articulated. The socialist past and postsocialist neoliberal present are the major sociopolitical and historical processes upon which Bao (2018) focuses.

The concept "becoming" is particularly instructive for this research on sexual subjectivities of Vietnamese women for two reasons. The concept "becoming" is employed in this study to signify "the process of formation, reformation and transformation" (Bao 2018, 171) of the sexual subject – which I term "*subject-in-becoming*". Furthermore, theorizing *subject-in-becoming*, as Bao (2018, 7) argues and I also contend, opens space for an identification of "the historical and discursive conditions of its emergence".

Situated knowledge and politics of location: A feminist epistemology

This research is underpinned by a feminist epistemology, namely situated knowledge, to explore sexual subjectivities of young Vietnamese women. Situated knowledge can be

understood as knowledge produced from a bottom-up position, which considers the location, position, and embodiment of the knower and the known (Haraway 1988). Haraway (1988, 581) refers to situated knowledges as "feminist objectivity", which moves away from widely accepted notions of science underpinned by positivist, reductionist, and universalist claims. In this sense, situated knowledge provides an alternative epistemological understanding of what counts as rational knowledge by committing to a production of knowledge from the position of partiality, which emphasizes the *politics of location*.

A "politics of location" (Rich 1986) is deployed in this study both as an epistemological and political commitment to produce accountable knowledge. Rich (1986), in her essay titled "Notes toward a politics of location", argues for the particular importance of locatedness, which allows one to see the particular history that come with and through the body that is speaking. This notion has been deployed by other feminist scholars in their anti-imperial, postcolonial works such as hooks (1989), John (1996), and Moraga (1981). Building upon Rich's work (1986), Kaplan (1994) advocates for an understanding of location that recognises the relationship between power and knowledge as contingent upon one's history, geography, and culture, and which has the ability to shape one's intellectual and political projects.

Adhering to Haraway's (1988) *situated knowledge* and Rich's (1986) *politics of location*, I seek not to produce knowledge that is unlocated, encompassing, and value-free. Rather, this research maps out sexual subjectivities of Vietnamese women that are partial, embodied, and located in the regional context of Vietnam specifically and inter-Asian context more broadly. This goal speaks to Chen's (2010) urgent call for more theorization of (Southeast) Asia *from* Asia, which will be discussed in Chapter 6.

A feminist narrative approach to researching sexual subjectivities

Narrative research provides a powerful approach to understand one's subjectivity, of which feminist theorist de Lauretis (1984, 106) writes:

> Subjectivity is engaged in the cogs of narrative and indeed constituted in the relation of narrative, meaning and desire; so that the very work of narrativity is the engagement of the subject in certain positionalities of meaning and desire.

Telling narratives is, therefore, not simply a form of self-descriptive, but rather is "fundamental to the emergence and reality of the subject" (Kerby 1991, 4). Narratives are means through which people come to understand themselves and their world as meaningful, in effect to construct their social reality (Cihodariu 2012; Fivush 1991; McAdams 1996).

This research employs a feminist approach to narrative inquiry to explore sexual subjectivities of young Vietnamese women. Narrative inquiry has been chosen as, firstly, it allows the participants to tell their life stories, from which the processes of subject "formation, reformation and transformation" (Bao 2018, 171) can be explored. Secondly, it opens up space for an investigation of "the interconnections between individual stories of 'sexuality', an intimate and personalized realm, and the broader sociocultural and political context of sexualities" (Squire et al. 2014, 61; see also Plummer 1995). I argue that a feminist narrative approach is useful in studying sexual subjectivities of Vietnamese women as it does not simply report women's narratives, but also asks questions about how particular stories are being narrated in a way that does not pathologize, reject their stories, or risk silencing others (Woodiwiss 2017).

In what follows, I will outline the procedure of my research, which is predominantly guided by those outlined in Riessman (2008). Riessman (2008, 8) argues for situating personal narratives in context, "for storytelling occurs at a historical moment with its circulating discourses and power relations". In this sense, narrative inquiry gives space not only for an investigation of the way in which young Vietnamese women negotiate the competing discourses that inform and structure their sexual subjectivities. This research further seeks to view participants' stories as they occurred and are narrated within the complex entanglement

of various competing discourses and the manner in which they influence the way participants come to make sense of and interpret their sexual experiences.

Methodology

For the purposes of this study, I recruited and interviewed nine participants aged 22 to 30 years old. My initial criteria included (self-identified) women who are tertiary educated, live in HCMC, and have never been in a marital relationship. This cohort was chosen due to their complex and changing positionality as young women who are situated at the crossroads of competing discourses on sex, sexuality, and gender, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, in the context of a cosmopolitan and postcolonial space such as HCMC, which I discussed in Chapter 1. The chosen cohort also shares similar demographic background as the researcher, which I will further explore in more detail later in this chapter.

Such criteria of selection posed several limitations for this study. All of my participants identify as heterosexual women and have never engaged in any form of queer relationship. As I employed snowball sampling to recruit participants through my personal and professional networks, my participants are not only located (primarily) in urban spaces, but also have access to other cosmopolitan spaces for study, work, and travel. As such, they are very specifically classed; most of them were born into middle-class families; others received opportunities and access to study that gave them upward mobility. The lifestyles of the middle-class in HCMC, as Leshkowich (2012) argues, are mixed between the state's postsocialist agenda and individual consumption. Urban middle-class women as a consequence face various dilemmas of "freedom, constraint, anxiety, and morality" in negotiating new modes of production and consumption (Leshkowich 2012, 95). Therefore, HCMC, as a site that invokes anxiety and facilitates contradicting social forces, offers the ideal space for an in-depth exploration of the different discourses that influence young women's sexual subjectivities.

Snowball sampling technique was selected because of the sensitive nature of this topic in the cultural setting of Vietnam. By using snowball sampling, I arrived at the interview space through a known and/or trusted connection, which helped me build a relationship with my participants. Among the participants, three are my acquaintances through various networks and the others were introduced to me by my acquaintances. Because of my method of recruitment, the women do not always fall into the prescribed criteria. One participant did not finish university while another did not grow up in HCMC, and many are now studying or working overseas. All of them, however, have lived in the city for a prolonged period of time. For this reason, I argue that they have experiences that engage with the space of HCMC; therefore, they have been required to navigate the politics of such a space that has, in turn, informed and produced their sexual subjectivities.

In what follows, I will briefly introduce my participants before detailing the process of our encounters. Some of my participants' details such as occupation, city or nation of residence (apart from HCMC), and age have been slightly altered or omitted in an effort to protect their anonymity. I made such changes in ways that do not significantly affect the politics of location I commit to explore.

Participants

I met Mai when we studied at the same university for our Bachelor's degree in HCMC. She is 26 years old and is doing a Master's degree at a South Korean university. Due to travel restrictions during the COVID pandemic, Mai has been studying remotely from home for the past year. She grew up in a province near HCMC and moved to the city to pursue her Bachelor's degree. Mai lived with her friends or by herself in HCMC when she was at university and is now staying with her parents. I had the first interview with Mai in July 2021 and two follow-up interviews in August and September.

Anh Thuỳ, who is also 27, was introduced to me by Mai. I interviewed Thuỳ once in August 2021. She was born and grew up in HCMC. She is the only child in an upper class family. After graduated from her Bachelor's degree in design, Thuỳ has been working for several (gaming) companies as a designer in HCMC.

Tú, who is 29 years old, was born and grew up in HCMC in a family of four. Her father is a university professor. She has a younger brother who is now a lawyer. I met Tú five years ago when we worked together, after which Tú gained a full scholarship to do her Doctoral degree in North America. I interviewed Tú once in July 2021 when she was in HCMC, being mid-way through her Doctoral training.

Diệu Anh was introduced to me by my primary school friend. She is 24 years old and works for a logistic company in Japan. She lived in HCMC throughout her childhood and moved to Japan for her Bachelor's degree, after which she was employed and has lived there ever since. I interviewed Diệu Anh for the first time in August 2021 and had a follow-up conversation in March 2022. She is currently living with her boyfriend in Japan and is preparing to move to North America by the end of 2022.

Diệp was introduced to me by a childhood friend. Diệp is 25 years old and works for an agency that specializes in online advertisement optimization. Diệp grew up with her mother and grandmother since her parents divorced when she was in primary school. Diệp started working as soon as she finished high school as her mother did not support her financially to do a Bachelor's degree. I interviewed Diệp once in September 2021.

I was introduced to Linh by Diệp, who is Linh's high school friend. Linh lived with her mother after her parents divorced until she finished high school, after which she moved to Singapore. Linh is now working in Singapore after finishing her Bachelor's degree there. I first interviewed Linh in September 2021 and had a follow-up conversation in March 2022.

I first met Vân Du when we went to the same university in HCMC. However, we did not get close until much later when we worked together. Vân Du is the only child in her family.

Her parents divorced after she finished university and she lived with her mother until she moved to Europe in 2020. She is now doing her Master's degree and has been living with her long-term boyfriend for the past year.

Xuân, who is 25 years old, was introduced to me by Vân Du. Xuân lives with her parents and a younger sister but spent her childhood with her grandparents. After finishing her Bachelor's degree, Xuân has been working for several companies in film production and distribution in HCMC. I had the pre-interview conversation with Xuân in July 2021 and only got to interview her in February 2022, after which we had a few follow-up conversations throughout February and March 2022. HCMC introduced several months of lockdown in the half-end of 2021 due to the COVID pandemic. Xuân, therefore, had to work from home and felt that she did not have the space she needed to talk to me.

Encounters and ethics

I employed narrative interviews to explores young women's stories of their sexual experiences, the way in which they make sense of those experiences, as well as the situatedness of their sense- and self-making processes. The narrative interviews were conducted through a two-stage process. In the first stage, an informal 'pre-interview' session was held on Zoom to explain the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and to gain the participant's informed consent to proceed with the narrative interview. I envisioned this process as part of the practice of giving "trigger warnings" (Clare 2017): I anticipated that, in some cases, the participants might have experienced sexual abuse, assault, and/or other traumatic life events associated with their sexual relationships. By informing the participants of the potential risks of triggers, my goal was to let the participants decide for themselves if they would like to proceed with the interview.

In the first stage, I also answered questions my participants had about the project. I informed my participants that they could choose not to proceed with the interview if they were

not comfortable sharing their personal experiences and that they could withdraw from the project at any stage. After the pre-interview session, I sent my participants an invitation letter and information sheet, consent form, and a list of prompting questions that they may think about in order to prepare for the narrative interview (see Appendices). I then proceeded with the narrative interview once I received verbal consent form my participants. Guided by Pascoe Leahy's (2021) notion of "subtle ethics", I asked for the signed consent after the narrative interview to let my participants decide whether they wished to remain in the study once they were aware of the information they have given. Doing this would also leave space for the participants to review, take out, or give further clarifications. Apart from the eight participants I have introduced above, I also interviewed a ninth participant, who chose not to sign the consent form after the interview, resulting in her withdrawal from this study. I have, therefore, not included any details and narratives of her nor used any parts of her story in this study.

In the second stage, I conducted narrative interview(s) via Zoom, which were usually scheduled one week after the pre-interview. A number of my participants were also contacted afterward for follow-up conversation(s). My interviews usually lasted approximately 2 hours, which meant that the total length of conversation with each participant varied from 2 to 6 hours. In the narrative interview, I asked my participants to narrate a story starting from their coming-of-age experiences (e.g., getting their period, having their breasts grow, etc.). This could also include feelings of attraction to others and experiences of sexual desire. Alternatively, they could start with the prompting questions I had sent them after the pre-interview session if they felt more comfortable. In the list of prompting questions, various topics such as sexual attraction, sexual desire, and pleasure, as well as gender norms and behaviors within/outside of relationships, were invoked (see Appendix A). The aim of this interview was to generate detailed accounts of the participants' sense-making and self-making process, which was facilitated by asking follow-up questions and seeking further detail on meaningful events (Riessman 2008).

The topic asked participants to share details of their lives and relationships that are intimate and sensitive. L.A.T. Do et al. (2017) suggest topics of sex and sexuality are imbued with a sense of embarrassment and shame; therefore, they are rarely discussed publicly or in an open manner.[11] This was the case with one participant (Xuân), who was not able to do the interview for months after the pre-interview session as she did not have the personal space she needed to talk about such topics when she was working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. While I initially planned to travel to HCMC to conduct my fieldwork, I had to do my interviews online as travel restrictions were imposed after the COVID-19 pandemic hit. By conducting my interviews digitally, I managed to contact people who, at the time of the interviews, were not physically located in HCMC (although, as I outlined above, they had grown up and/or spent considerable time in the city). Doing interviews online, however, posed several challenges that, in turn, impacted the results of this study. As this study asks sensitive questions and personal life details of my participants, the online space made it much harder to build rapport and to care for them in the interview process. Providing emotional support, giving my participants time to stop and/or continue the story at their own pace, and checking in on them during and after the interviews, were some of the tactics of care that I employed to manage the online interview space when doing research on sexuality and, in some parts, (sexual) violence (Pascoe Leahy 2021).

All interviews were conducted and transcribed in Vietnamese, my native language, for analysis. Crossley (2000) highlights the inextricable link between one's lived experience and the use of language, as well as the dominant narratives and discourses that are a part of the culture in which one is raised. Conducting the interviews and doing the analysis in the Vietnamese language, I argue, helped capture the stories, experiences, the use of language and its implicit meanings, as well as the discourses that have come to dominate Vietnamese society

[11] In Vietnam, sex and sexuality are not often discussed in private settings (e.g., between parents and children), educational institutions (e.g., schools), or public spaces (Bui 2020; L.A.T. Do et al. 2017).

and culture. English translations were made only for the interview excerpts that are presented in this thesis.[12] Any proverbs, folklores, and idioms in Vietnamese are also presented in the original and interpreted in English in an attempt to account for the nuances of meanings in Vietnamese that are sometimes lost in translation. Inspired by Anzaldúa's (1987) writing on borderlands and the politics of using "home" tongues, I hope to bring Vietnamese narratives into the center of this study. This is also the reason why I chose to include extended excerpts from my participants' narratives verbatim in Vietnamese followed by English translation.

Fieldnotes of my conceptualization of this research, contacting and interacting with the participants, were also taken in an attempt to reflexively engage with and reflect on the process of producing data. Drawing on the postcolonial feminist research practice (Dutta and Basu 2013), I have sought to identify how my own socioeconomic, ethnicity, gender, educational background and experiences inform my interpretations of my participants' narratives, which I will further discuss in the following section.

Positionality

A politics of location, as Braidotti (2009, 243) asserts, indicates "cartographies of power, which rest on a form of self-scrutiny, a critical and genealogical self-narrative". Therefore, I seek to reflect on my positionality as a person and a researcher, and to consider its implications for my research. This is also an attempt to situate my analysis within the field of feminist research (Hesse-Biber 2011).

Growing up in HCMC in a working/middle-class family, I was given access to adequate education and a comfortable life. The conditions of education my parents provided for me have given me access to spaces, people, and opportunities that I would otherwise not have had. These circumstances not only allowed me to now pursue a postgraduate degree in Gender Studies in

[12] All translations in this thesis are made by me, unless otherwise noted.

Europe, a discipline that barely exists in Vietnam (as is the case with many other mainstream subjects in humanities and social sciences).[13] I also have access to persons with similar socioeconomic backgrounds, which is reflected above in the introduction to my participants. The way in which socioeconomic class shapes our access, interaction, and sense-making project will be discussed further in the following chapters.

In emphasizing the state of (non)existing of Gender Studies in Vietnam, I stress and acknowledge the contingency of my conversations with my participants on the limited discourses available in the Vietnamese language on the subjects of sex, sexuality, and gender. Language use will be discussed in Chapter 5, as this has implications not only for a discursive construction of sexual subjectivities in Vietnamese, but also an understanding of the locations from which my participants speak. Such an understanding is politically and intellectually important for me as I aim to foreground my project in the nexus of the postcolonial, postsocialist, and neoliberal context of Vietnam.

The motivations for which I pursued this project are reflected throughout this dissertation in both my writing and analysis. My analysis, therefore, was partly informed by my personal history and lived experience. Part of my intellectual journey thus far has involved an ongoing reflection and reinterpretation of my past experiences, many of which were violent on different levels. As much as this has opened space for me to further explore and theorize experiences of violence of my peers, it has also created tremendous challenge in the process of listening to my participants, which I discuss in the following section.

[13] See, for example, Nguyên's (2012) article on the lack of applications to social sciences degrees in Vietnam, pointing to various relating problems such as the closing of many of such programs at university level, lack of human resources for jobs requiring such expertise. Nguyên suggests, and I also contend, that the shifting governmental focus since *Đổi Mới* on promoting hard sciences degree plays a pivotal role in discursively devaluing social sciences programs.

Strategies of listening

The narrative interviews turned out to be much more emotionally challenging than I had expected. As various accounts of violence emerged within the interview space, negotiating such a space and the repetitive listening that was required afterward made the process tremendously difficult. While several scholars have written about this topic in a broad sense in more recent years (Boesten and Henry 2018; Schneider 2020), there is no specific guidelines on negotiating the data we produce when researching violence and trauma. Listening to my participants' narratives, as I ambiguously anticipated, brought back many memories I have long forgotten (Caruth 1996; Herman 1997). Many narratives of violence also reflected similar tactics of *not* remembering, a detail account of which is presented in Chapter 4.

One of the strategies of listening I deployed to negotiate such experiences of retraumatization was to (re)visit my interview recordings at different times and in different spaces to allow myself to process information (and memories) both as a whole and in fragments. I usually listened to the interview recordings as a whole (when possible) a few days after the interview (after having processed the interview space and content) to mark down any potential points of trigger. This technique allowed me to actively engage, disengage, and/or reengage with difficult information in my own times and spaces.

My listening in this project is guided by Riessman's (2008) and Frank's (2012) dialogic narrative analysis. This approach, as Riessman suggests, involves paying attention not only to what is spoken, but toward whom the utterance is directed. As I aim to not only reiterate narratives, but also make sense of the context in which the narratives are situated and (re)produced, I argue that such an approach allows for a reading of the interactional, historical, and institutional contexts of narratives. In deploying such approach, I also aim to speak *with* my participants, rather than about them (Frank 2012). To speaking *with* is also to pay attention to the multiple voices, such as that of the parents, communities, and institutions, expressed in my participants' utterances.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed my use of the notions "subject" and "sexual subjectivities", informed both by Foucauldian and queer feminist theorizations. My contention for such usages is to situate subjectivities in the historical, material, discursive, and affective context of contemporary HCMC. A feminist epistemology that accounts for situated knowledge and a politics of location is of particular important for this study. A feminist narrative methodology was employed for data production purposes, which included narrative interviews with 8 participants. As this study deals with sensitive and difficult topics, I discussed various strategies and tactics for entering the research space, engaging with participants, and listening to difficult topics. These strategies and tactics are informed by feminist research practices and have been readapted in ways that fit with the sociocultural context of contemporary Vietnam. As such, I hope that my discussion of data production and ethics can spark further conversations on ways to engage and negotiate research on difficult topics in Vietnam specifically and Southeast Asia more broadly. In what follows, I will present my participants' narratives of sexual subject formation as parts of the process of *becoming*.

Chapter 3: Forming sexual subjects

In this chapter, I present the journeys through which my participants came to know and make sense of sex, sexuality, and gender. In (re)telling my participants' stories, I am by no means arguing for a singular process of sexual subject formation. Rather, the purpose is to arrive at a tentative understanding of sexual subjectivities as processes of *becoming* for young, middle-class, urban, unmarried Vietnamese women. This understanding will be further developed in the following chapters where I discuss the ways in which my participants negotiate disruptive forces, such as experiences of violence, and engage in the process of continuous negotiation with themselves and their social worlds. In this chapter, I argue that young Vietnamese women navigated the processes of sexual subject formation in relation to their family, friends, romantic partners, consumption of popular culture, and social norms in specific historical, temporal, and spatial contexts.

This chapter focuses on my participants' narratives of their childhood, adolescence, and, in some cases, early adulthood. I argue that there are different routes through which my participants became sexual subjects. I categorize these experiences into four main themes: 1) their relationships with their family; 2) the different ways through which they learnt about sex and romantic relationships; 3) their experiences of having (sexual) attention and attraction; and 4) their first sexual encounter. It is important to note that these themes do not follow a strict chronological order, nor do they prescribe a single pathway through which every young woman becomes a sexual subject. In dividing the stories into thematic sections, I also do not aim to homogenize the diverse experiences and narratives even within each section. Rather, the thematic sections should be seen as a framework through which I theorize the processes of becoming sexual subjects.

Each of these processes, while presented separately in this chapter for the purpose of clarity, are also inextricably connected, forming sexual subjects-*in-relation*. I argue that sexual

subjectivities can be thought of as subject positions that are interdependent and always exist in relation. I am drawing here upon Shohet's (2017) ethnographic account of love and marriage in contemporary Vietnam. She argues that women's pursuit of marriage needs to be understood through the complex intertwining of *tình cảm* (sentiment) and material needs. Shohet (2017, 568) posits that *tình cảm*, "the Vietnamese moral sentiment of care and concern for the other out of mutual affection", is rooted in the ontological perception of selfhood as interdependent on others. Building on Zigon's (2014) concept of a Heidegger-inspired ethical *da-sein* (being-in-the-world), Shohet argues, and I also contend, for the need to view the subject as "the relational moral subject", instead of "an autonomous, self-governing subject" (Shohet 2017, 570).[14] This understanding, however, cannot be conflated with a lack of agency. In what follows, I will account for the positions of my participants in the formation of their sexual subjectivities that are both relational and contextually agentic.

Family and collective history

> *Có một lần mẹ Diệu Anh (DA) nói với DA là không cần phải quan hệ tới lúc sau khi kết hôn - tới sau lúc kết hôn thì mới nên quan hệ. […] Nói chung DA cũng nghĩ mẹ DA cũng không biết gì nhiều hả. Tại vì chắc mẹ DA cũng đợi tới sau khi kết hôn mới quan hệ. […] DA nghĩ hai người đó cũng không có nhiều kinh nghiệm về chuyện đó lắm để mà nói. Thương bố mẹ…. Chắc thời đại trước đó còn tệ hơn nữa. Chắc thời ông bà mình còn khó hơn nữa, tại thời đó cũng là thời chiến tranh, nên cũng nghèo khó rồi này nọ, nên những chuyện này người ta cũng không có… thời gian và tâm sức để mà nghĩ tới những chuyện này.* [15]

[14] *Dasein* (being-in-the-world) is a concept developed by Martin Heidegger (1996) in his book, *Being and Time*, in which he puts forward an ontological assumption of the interdependence of being and the world. Zigon (2014) employs Heidegger's concept of Dasein to move beyond traditional moral concepts and arrive at an understanding of morality that is inherent to the experience of being-in-the-world.

[15] Some of my participants used their name as their personal pronoun (which is equivalent to the English pronoun "I") when speaking to me. To use one's own name instead of the pronoun "I" in conversations is common practice in the Vietnamese language, especially when the people having the dialogue are of the same age.

> There was one time my mother told me that there is no need to have sex until after one got married – one should only have sex after marriage. […] I guess I think my mother does not know much. Because perhaps my mother also waited until she got married to have sex. […] I think they [my parents] do not have a lot of experience in that to tell. Poor them… Perhaps the generation before them was worse. Perhaps our grandparents' generation was harsher because it was wartime during that time so there was poverty, so people probably did not have… time and resources to think about these things.

My participants' engagement with their parents illuminates a specific familial relationship that is interwoven with broader cultural norms, socioeconomic conditions, and the colonial history of Vietnam. The abstract above was taken from my interview with Diệu Anh, who told me that she grew up under strict surveillance from her parents. She was always taken to and picked up from school by her father, who also demanded to know with whom she was spending time. This was not uncommon for my participants: Vân Du also shared similar experiences from throughout her adolescence. Growing up, Diệu Anh was not allowed to date boys during school, as she told me that her parents believed it would interfere with her studies. One chain of logic underpinning this belief is that sexual activities might occur in spaces that are not visible to parents, thus compromising the *morality* and *respectability* of my interview participants. The notion of "respectability" and its discursive circulation in Vietnam will be further discussed in the next chapter.

The importance of virginity asserted by Diệu Anh's mother was found in one form or another in all of my participants' narratives. *Trinh tiết* (virginity) is considered a marker of a woman's morality. It is believed that this ideology came about through the Chinese colonial period of Vietnam from the 2nd century BCE to the 10th century CE (T.N.B. Ngo 2004). Existing literature on gender in Vietnam refers to Confucian values, which dictate that "a Vietnamese woman should show good 'morality' by remaining a virgin until marriage and avoiding adultery, divorce, and abortion" (Rydstrøm 2006, 284) to explain the ongoing moral

weight placed on a woman's virginity. While this discourse remains prevalent in contemporary Vietnam, I argue that it plays out in a much more complex and nuanced way in everyday life. This is seen in Diệu Anh's reflection on her mother's belief by saying that she thinks her mother does not know much about sex. While it is tempting to interpret this as a way of discrediting her mother's claim on the importance of virginity, I argue that Diệu Anh's condolence for her parents and the previous generation can be understood as an expression of sympathy. In sympathizing with her parents' experience, Diệu Anh attempts to understand how their contention is grounded in a different temporal, socioeconomic, and political context, while maintaining her own distinct viewpoint on sex.

Diệu Anh's experience growing up strikes some similarities to other participants and myself in the way that our parents took care of, as well as asserted control over, us as young women. I argue that it is through such caretaking that various forms of surveillance are seen to be justified. *Lo cho* (taking care of) can often be used by parents in explaining their behaviors of, for instance, reading their child's diary in the case of Diệu Anh; and demanding to know when, where, and with whom their child socializes in the case of Linh, Tú, and Vân Du. Details of Diệu Anh's relationship with her parents will be discussed in the next chapter, where I will expand on her reaction to her parents and the way in which she has negotiated various forms of violence.

Not encouraging or forbidden one's child from engaging in any kind of romantic relationship during adolescence is another common way through which parents exert care over their daughters. Tú, in telling the story of her childhood, said:

> *Nói chung nhà chị là không bao giờ đề cập tới bất kì vấn đề yêu đương gì…, không bao giờ luôn. […] Mấy chuyện yêu đương giống như là mấy chuyện bậy bạ, mà nó tào lao á, không được nói ra á.*

> My family never discussed anything related to romantic relationships…, never. […] Relationships and dating are treated as improper matters, like they are frivolous, should not be spoken about.

Tú's narrative spoke to the censoring and silencing of relationships and sexual matters in the family. If relationships were considered frivolous for teenagers, then sex was definitely off limits. This experience was also reflected in Vân Du's, Diệu Anh's, Linh's, and Xuân's narratives. Trinh et al. (2009) suggest that it is the feeling of embarrassment that discourages parents from talking about sexual matters in Vietnam. While this might have been the case, I argue that the silencing around sex among my participants' parents needs to be understood within the collective Vietnamese history of warfare, as well as the political and social turmoil. This history has structured everyday lived experience of generations of Vietnamese in the past few decades, which I will expand on below.

The discourse on romantic relationships being an improper matter for young girls is prevalent in contemporary Vietnam, especially in urban spaces. For instance, Tú told me that she used to like an older boy at her secondary school and that all of her friends knew about it, but not her family. When I asked if her parents forbade her to *yêu đương* [have romantic love], Tú told me that "*cấm thì không có nói miệng ra là cấm, nhưng mà lúc nào cũng nói là con nít là phải lo học*" [they did not explicitly say that they forbade me, but they always said that children must focus on studying]. It is a commonly belief in Vietnam that during primary and secondary school, and sometimes extended to the tertiary level, girls should not engage in any romantic relationships as it would distract them or hinder their academic pursuits, which are seen as the utmost important task of the young middle-class. A study by L.A.T. Do et al. (2017) on parental perceptions of teenage sexuality in Hanoi, for instance, illuminates a commonly held idea that becoming involved in romantic relationships might lead to unwanted pregnancy and school dropouts among girls. As L.A.T. Do et al. (2017) shed light on such negative views of teenage sexuality, they advocate for a comprehensive sex education program in schools,

which I will further discuss in the next section. However, L.A.T. Do et al. (2017) fail to engage further with the historical, socioeconomic, and political context that structures the way teenagers' and young adults' sexualities are perceived.

Returning to the emphasis on study exerted by parents, which was used as a justification for precluding any discussions of sex and romantic relationships, I argue that it speaks to the history of colonialism, warfare, and recent political developments in Vietnam. Most of my participant' parents were born and lived through the Vietnam War (1964-1975), which was followed by a period of economic, political, and social turmoil.[16] Focusing on the experience of South Vietnamese soldiers in the aftermath of war, N.H.C. Nguyen (2013, 2016a) writes about the way in which the experience of war and its aftermath shapes inter-generational transmission of war experience, collective memory, and remembrance. Drawing on her work, I argue that the way in which my participants' parents and grandparents' (in)direct experience of colonialism, warfare, poverty, and various political turmoil over the past century has shaped what I call a *collective history*, which informs the way in which they navigate everyday life. As studying is discussed in conjunction with the prospect of having a bright future (L.A.T. Do et al. 2017), I contend that it signifies an anxiety over economic, social, and cultural capital, that is rooted in their (grand)parents' collective experiences of war, violence, and poverty. This is because education is often perceived as a pathway to upward mobility or a guarantee of a more economically secure future (Earl 2014). As I have noted, most of my participants come from middle-class background and/or have had the opportunity and access to education for upward mobility. Yet the prioritization of education for children is not class-specific as it has been made a "*quốc sách hàng đầu*" [national priority].[17] Despite education being encouraged

[16] For further discussions on the postwar economic crisis, political violence and social turmoil, see Huynh (1977). Vong (2018), while focusing on the role of the Families for Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association (FVPPA), which was formed and led by Vietnamese women in Virginia, the United States, in support of women who had male relatives in reeducation camps after the war, discusses some of the political violence pertinent to South Vietnam.

[17] Article 35 in the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1992 states that education and training are national strategy and priority.

on a national level, I argue that having access to, and being able to pursue, education is contingent upon one's geographical area and socioeconomic status (Cobbe 2011; Trần 2011). In that sense, I suggest that an understanding of education as a pathway to a better future also maps onto the (class-specific) state discourse on national belonging, which urges urban middle-class families to uphold Vietnamese traditions and moral standards and to be financially independent, while ensuring that their children are well-educated and ready to contribute to the country's rising prosperity (Earl 2014; L.A. Hoang 2020; Werner 2009). In the following section, I will explore some gender- and class-specific ways through which my participants learned and engaged with romantic and sexual relationships while navigating their parents' expectations.

"I knew that it was something sensitive": Learning about sex and romantic relationships[18]

My participants had different pathways to their learning about romantic relationships, sex, and sexuality. Vân Du said that her first awareness of sexual matters came at the age of 5 when she saw her parents having sex. Vân Du noted that at the time, she did not understand what it was that she saw or why her parents did it, but "*intuitively mình biết là cái đó là something sensitive, cho nên họ mới đi vào một cái space privately để làm*" [intuitively I knew that it was something sensitive, so they had to go to a private space to do it]. Vân Du's recollection here points to the overall silencing of discussions of sex within the family context.

While sex and relationships were not often discussed at home, as I have demonstrated in the previous section, these topics were also censored at school and in the mainstream media. Diệu Anh expressed her frustration with regard to the limited sex education lesson she received in school. Sex education was not included in the official curriculum for my participants and remains very limited in scope until the present day (L.A.T. Do et al. 2017). Diệu Anh told me

[18] This quotation was taken from my interview with Vân Du when she spoke about the first time she saw her parents having sex.

that in her high school, information about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), the only topic discussed in relation to sex, was taught at the end of the school semester when the exam season was over. This meant that few students paid attention as it was not material that would be tested in exams. In other words, not only were sex- and sexuality-related matters not included in the pedagogical system, but they were also considered a taboo subject around which only certain topics such as STDs were allowed to be discussed.

Jokes around sex, however, were common among the male school peers of my participants, indicating a clear gender dynamic in the *speaking* of sex in public spaces. Talking or implying sex in the comic form can be seen as the only way in which (mostly male) teenagers learn about and navigate sexual matters. This, however, was not an option for my participants by nature of their class and gender: around their female peers, talking or joking about sex was considered indecent for middle-class, educated girls: a social group in which most of my participants fit (Leshkowich 2012; Nguyễn-võ 2012). I refer to the middle-class here not only as a socioeconomic category, but also a social class that is defined through lifestyles (see Leshkowich 2012). Instead of through educative materials provided at school, therefore, my participants' gendered and classed experience of learning about sex were solitary and mediated through the consumption of (educational) texts, erotic (graphic) novels, and, in some cases, pornography.

(Educational) texts

Anh Thuỳ learnt about sex and relationships through a book called *Hoa hồng giấu trong cặp sách* [A rose hidden in school bags] that her mother bought for her in early secondary school.[19] *Hoa hồng giấu trong cặp sách* is a translated book that recounts the experiences of

[19] It is unclear whether the nouns in the original book title were meant to be in plural or singular form. I chose to translate *Hoa hồng* as 'a rose', which symbolizes romantic love. School bags symbolize students, and as the book tells multiple stories, I believe that it is appropriate to use the word 'school bags' in its plural form.

learning about sex and relationships and engaging in sexual activities of 13 teenagers at the age of 17 in China. It was originally published in 2004 by two Chinese reporters and researchers, Sun Yun Xiao and Zhang Yin Mo. The book was translated and published in Vietnam in 2006. Shortly after publication, the book became a phenomenon of its own, gaining a reputation as a book for sex education in Vietnam, despite not having any solid information and advice on gender, relationships, and sexual health.[20] The book is structured in the form of questions and answers, through which the authors present their interviews with the teenagers on their experiences – seemingly without any further analysis or argumentation.

When speaking about the book, Anh Thuỳ told me that she did not know at the time of purchase, but after reading the book, she realized that it was intended for sex education. Anh Thuỳ emphasized that "*có những cái experience kiểu quan hệ xong rồi có thai xong rồi struggle với nó như thế nào*" [there are experiences like girls having sex and getting pregnant, and then struggling with it]. It is important to note that Anh Thuỳ brought this up as an example of the kind of stories being narrated in the book. As the idea that one might get pregnant after engaging in sexual activity is perpetuated in popular culture, written texts, and mass media (e.g., K. Anh, Triệu, and Phương 2018; Thu 2013), I argue that this has become a popular risk-based discourse through which the dangers of (premarital) sex is reiterated in the family. Despite having read the book, Anh Thuỳ stated that she did not have a clear idea that the time what sex involves, but rather when, where, and with whom one should have sex.

Consuming graphic novels

Mai, unlike my other participants, made it clear to me that she did not have any interest in her male peers and the male body when she was growing up. She said that the first time she

[20] The popularity of the book is evidenced in the amount of press coverage (e.g., Y. Anh 2006; Vân 2006).

had an interest in male bodies was when she started reading *Boys' Love (BL) manga*, a genre of Japanese graphic novels that features male-to-male romance:

> *Khoảng cuối cấp 2, đầu cấp 3, hoặc là khoảng đầu mùa hè năm đó, thì tao nhớ là tao chỉ đang đoc truyện tranh thiếu nữ bình thường thôi. Rồi tao đi mướn truyện thì mướn nhầm một cái truyện mà nó cũng hơi có cái gì đấy trong đó ấy, kiểu homosexual, homoeroticism. Nhưng mà nó vẫn là straight story, nó chỉ là có một cái hint gì đó giữa hai bạn nam thôi. Lúc đấy tao cũng chưa biết cái này là cái gì ấy, tao chỉ có cảm giác là tao khá là thích cái kiểu đấy thôi. Xong thì đấy là một thế giới mới đã mở ra với tao và tao bắt đầu tao/ tao đọc. At first thì tao chỉ đọc về kiểu tình cảm bình thường thôi xong sau đó thì nó sẽ escalate lên những cái doujinshi mà nó sexual hơn, thì đó là lần đầu tiên mà tao thật sự tao nhìn cơ thể nam giới.*
>
> I remember I was just reading normal *shoujo* manga around the end of secondary school, early high school, or around the beginning of the summer of that [transition] year.[21] Then one time I went to borrow manga I accidentally got one that had a bit of homoerotic elements in it. It was still a straight story, but it seems like there might be something going on between two male characters. At the time I still did not know what this was, but I knew that I quite like that kind of manga. So a new world opened to me and I started to read [boys' love manga]. In the beginning I was just reading normal romantic stories, and then escalated to more sexual content. That was the first time I took a proper look at male bodies.

BL manga was "a new world" for Mai as she had previously only read manga that featured heterosexual relationships. It was through male homoeroticism that Mai developed her interest in male bodies. However, she was uncertain about the reason why she was interested in the homoerotic genre and continues to read it until the present day, albeit not as frequently as before. Mai explained that it was likely that she identified with the "bottom" male character

[21] *Shoujo* (少女) is a genre of manga targeting young women and usually features romantic relationships. Shoujo means young women in English.

that she started to find (masculine) male bodies attractive.[22] This reasoning, I argue, does not exclude the possibility that such male bodies can also be objects of desire. Here, I draw on Butler's (2004, 133) notion of psychic identification to argue that male bodies can function both as the object of desire and position to occupy. Butler suggests that identification and desire are not mutually exclusive processes, as identification can be understood as a mimesis practice through which a lost love – the object of desire – is incorporated into oneself. As such, it is the psychic that makes possible gender performance, through which an illusion of a prior subject and/or inner sex is produced.[23]

My purpose here has been to think through the process through which Mai consumed queer texts in her account of her (hetero)sexuality. In invoking Butler's psychoanalytic theory on psychic identification, I aim to interpret Mai's experience of reading homoerotic manga as a non-linear process of forming her sexual desire. As BL manga are mostly produced by and for women, phantasmic constructions of romantic love between androgenous men "transgress and queer *how* and *what* their supposedly 'straight' female readers are expected to fantasize about sexually" (Wood 2006, 397, italics in original). While I do not seek to offer a definitive explanation for why homoeroticism appeals to Mai, I contend that Mai's experience alludes to the complexity of gender, sexuality, and sexual subjectivities. A rejection of any linear relationships between gender, sexuality, and desire, I argue, is necessary for an understand of the process of sexual subject formation in ways that transgress the "heterosexual matrix" (Butler 1990, 208).[24]

[22] BL manga usually centers around an *uke-seme* (bottom-top) male couple. BL manga is mostly produced by and for women. Wood (2006) argues that female manga artists intentionally produce androgenous and aesthetically beautiful male characters in BL manga as a reaction to the more macho and phallic masculine men in mainstream heteronormative manga.

[23] It is important to note that Butler does not dismiss the ontological existence of the subject; rather, she refuses to conflate the subject with the psyche. It is the psychic, she argues, that exceeds the conscious subject.

[24] Butler's notion of the 'heterosexual matrix' refers to the way in which the body, gender, and desires function to present a coherent sex-gender-sexuality.

Apart from shoujo and BL manga, *hentai* was another popular genre of Japanese graphic novels that my participants raised. The word *hentai* (変態) can be loosely translated into English as perversion, which points to the sexually explicit and excessive content of the genre of cultural products it characterizes. Linh, who grew up with hentai, thinks that it shaped her understanding of gender roles and expectations, as well as her imagination of what an ideal (heterosexual) romantic relationship should look like. She stated that soon after she read hentai, she started to fantasize about dominant-submissive romantic relationships, which she had been pursuing until now.

Linh did not specify when she started reading manga, yet she began to read hentai when she was in the 5th grade, which was around the mid-2000s. By this time, reading manga had become a subculture among the youth in Vietnam as many popular series, such as *Doraemon* (1996), *Sailor Moon* (1995) and *Detective Conan* (1997), had entered the market in the 1990s.[25] It is unclear, however, if hentai was popular and if so to what extent among the youth in the 2000s, as it was considered *văn hoá phẩm đồi truỵ* [obsence material].[26] Such a perception traversed across different materials that contain sexually explicit content and imagery in Vietnam, including pornography. This understanding is, I suggest, an effect of the cultural campaigns against "*tệ nạn xã hội"* [social evils] that started in 1996 (Wilcox 2000), which I will further discuss in the following section.

Pornography

Seeing pornography (in)voluntarily came up in some of my participants' narratives. In what follows, I illustrate the way in which erotic materials were consumed and negotiated in

[25] The denoted years here are the years of publication in Vietnam.

[26] An ordinance against Prostitution (178/2004/NĐ-CP) issued in 2004 implies that obscene materials include texts, visual, or audio materials that advocate for dissipated, ignoble, and corrupted lifestyles that negatively affect one's morality and the fine customs and tradition of Vietnam. The Criminal Code of Vietnam (100/2015/QH13) also outlaws any acts of producing, copying, circulating, transporting, purchasing, or storing obscene materials. The Criminal Code, however, does not criminalize the consumption of such materials.

the everyday lives of my participants amidst the discursive demonization of such materials. Both Anh Thuỳ and Xuân spoke about their experience of seeing porn, yet had a very different response:

> *Anh Thuỳ: Hồi đó đi chơi hàng xóm họ hàng đồ, hồi đó mới có máy tính á. Xong cái cứ nhà nào có máy tính là mình nhảy lên mình vọc vọc. Mình cũng hơi hơi hổng có manner, xong mình dọc được folder (cười).*
>
> *Nhã: Lúc đó là Thuỳ khoảng bao nhiêu?*
>
> *Anh Thuỳ: Tầm lớp 7 thì phải, đầu lớp 7, cỡ đó. Xong cái lúc đó thì vẫn còn đang thích cái bạn nam từ hồi lớp 6, xong rồi 2 cái suy nghĩ nó nhập với nhau, xong mình thấy 'má đau đầu quá, nó làm sao á...'*
>
> Anh Thuỳ: Back then [I] was hanging out at my neighbors a lot, when computers just became a thing. Whenever there was a computer, I would play with it. I was a bit ill-mannered. I found a folder [that had pornographic video clips] (giggle).
>
> Nhã: How old were you at that point?
>
> Anh Thuỳ: I think in grade 7, approximately in the beginning of grade 7. At that time, I still had a crush on the boy I had liked since grade 6. And then the two thoughts merged, and I was like 'damn my head hurts, this is somewhat strange…'.

In Anh Thuỳ's account, she said that she found pornography accidentally, albeit it was probably curiosity that led her to opening such a folder. Anh Thuỳ contended that she was shocked when sex was mapped onto her romantic attraction to a boy: learning that sex was something that she could potentially perform with the boy she liked frightened her. Anh Thuỳ stated that she was not yet aware of what sexual intercourse looked like until she saw the pornographic content. The shock of seeing sex, I argue, should be understood as an indication of a phantasmic imagination of sex as a frightful act.

Unlike Anh Thuỳ, Xuân was led to a pornographic website while watching a video explaining sexual intercourse in animation when she was in grade 8 or 9. Xuân said that she followed the link to satisfy her curiosity as she had not been explained in school the process of sex. While in biology lessons, she recalled, students were taught about the male and female anatomy and the process of reproduction, yet it was not clear to her what acts were involved in sex. As she watched the animated video explaining sexual intercourse, she clicked on an advertisement that popped up, which led her to a pornographic site. Xuân watched one video and then shut the site. Unlike Anh Thuỳ, who felt frightened, Xuân said that:

> *Mình cảm thấy cũng… bình thường. Tại vì lúc đó là không có đủ hiểu để cảm thấy là… cái đó nó hay, hay nó dở, hay nó như thế nào. Chỉ là kiểu: À hoá ra nó là như vậy.*
>
> I felt… normal. Because at the time [I] didn't know enough to see… whether it was good, or bad, or whatever else. It was just like, oh it [sex] was like that.

Xuân seemed to treat pornographic content as a source of education at the time, which is not an uncommon phenomenon in Vietnam. A survey conducted in 2019 on Vietnamese adolescents' exposure to sexually explicit content found that 84,1% of the sample of 886 teens had seen such materials (V.L. Nguyen et al. 2021). The sample group was teenagers aged 15 to 18, who were born after 2000. While the sample group are younger than my cohort of participants (who were born in the 1990s), the survey remains indicative of the (in)voluntary consumption of sexually explicit contents among the youth.

Pornography, along with prostitution, drug-taking, and gambling, were listed as *văn hoá độc hại* [poisonous culture] and *tệ nạn xã hội* [social evils] by the Vietnamese government in its 1996 cultural campaign against social evils. In her fieldwork in rural northern Vietnam between the mid-1990s and early 2000s, Rydstrøm (2006) notes that anxiety around the consumption of poisonous culture fed into an apparatus that polices and keeps under surveillance young women's sexuality to maintain appropriate morality. In this line of logic,

pornography was seen not only as corrupted material, but also as having the potential to corrupt the morality of the youth.

Such fears, I argue, linger until today and can be traced back to the discursive constructions of ideal femininity over the past four decades, parts of which I discussed in Chapter 1. As *Đổi Mới* began in 1986, state-sponsored cultural campaigns have promoted new forms of femininity that are virtuous, family-oriented and consumer oriented, positioning women as the producer and reproducer of the family and nation (Werner 2009).[27] These campaigns simultaneously have denigrated women's sexuality, characterizing "the 'loose' women as symbols of Western depravity, social marginality, and feminine disorder" (Werner 2009, 4). Focusing on the governing of sex work in the late 1990s and early 2000s by the new neoliberal state, Nguyễn-võ (2012) suggests that state discourse on what constitutes the *good* woman is also demarcated by class differences, as it seeks to produce different kinds of producers and consumers for the market. In particular, middle-class urban women, a category into which most of my participants fall, are taught to maintain sexual purity and conjugal sex within marriage while lower-class sex workers are deemed "the fallen sisters" who are in need of rescue and moral rehabilitation (Nguyễn-võ 2012, 4). In recent years, news articles have reported cases of parents in shock when finding their teens viewing pornographic videos, with an underlying message on the consequences of watching pornography and advice for parents (e.g., Huyền 2022; Tuoitrenews 2015).

The (moral) panic around young girls and women's consumption of pornography, I argue, works to sustain the constructed middle-class feminine ideal, which is now policed by the institutions of family and education. These gender and sexual norms impacted the means through which my participants came to learn about sex and romantic relationships, as well as the emotional and moral discourses contained therein.

[27] These new forms of femininity follow the logic of the neoliberal market economy, which are vastly different from the idea of the revolutionary women that were embraced during the war (Werner 2009).

(Sexual) attraction

Feeling attracted to someone and/or their bodies was one of the main themes in my participants' narratives of their youth. These narratives, I argue, are inextricably intertwined with Rich's (1980) notion of "compulsory heterosexuality". Rich (1980) developed the concept of compulsory heterosexuality to refer to the ways in which (white, Western, middle-class) women have been structurally confined within heterosexual relationships. Although her focus was specifically on the American context, I invoke and adapt this concept in my subsequent analysis to illustrate the historically and contextually contingent forces that sustain heteronormativity in Vietnamese society.

Mai, for instance, was only exposed to female bodies when she grew up as she had seen her mother and aunts taking a shower when she was younger. Comparing to the male body that was inaccessible for Mai at that time, she said that female bodies gave her "*cảm giác gần gũi*" [familiar feelings]. She then told me about an incident where she had quietly observed her cousin's body as she had become curious as to whether they shared the same genitalia. This happened when Mai's cousin slept over at Mai's house when she was in grade 8. Mai repeated twice that this was not sexual and that she was not interested in male bodies at the time as she found them "scary". I argue that the reason(s) why Mai emphasized that it was not sexual attraction that motivated her to look at her (female) cousin's body was the fear of raising any suspicion about the possibility of a same-sex, incestuous relationship.

Homosexuality, historically, has been condemned in Vietnam in different ways. Homosexuality has been thought to be a physical and mental illness, a discourse that is suggested to be connected to colonial history. In her study of gender practices and mediumship in Vietnam, Endres (2016) draws on a documentary called *Love man love woman* (2007) by Nguyễn Trinh Thi. Her documentary title refers to the colloquial "*ái nam ái nữ*" in Vietnamese,

a term that is used to refer to homosexual men. Nguyễn's (2007) documentary focuses on the master medium Nguyễn Ngọc Đức, in which she suggests that gay men, through practices of mediumship, have founded spaces that allow for an expression of queerness within the homophobic society of Vietnam.[28] Various terms are employed in everyday language to refer to homosexuality, each of which can be located in different historical periods. For instance, "*pê đề*" is a colloquial term adopted from the French pédéraste, while "*đồng tính luyến ái*" is the official term for homosexuality that came into use in the 1930s and is a direct translation from the Chinese term for homosexuality (Pastoetter 2004, cited in Endres 2016, 205). "*Đồng cô*" has long been used to refer to gay men who engage in gender transgressive behaviors as spiritual mediums.

Horton and Rydström (2011), in exploring heterosexual masculinity in contemporary Vietnam, note that homosexuality remains invisible in most spheres as not getting married and having (male) progeny are considered a demonstration of impiety and a selfish act. Homosexuality has also been demonized and pathologized by various state institutions, including the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU), and is labeled as a cause of various social problems (L.A. Hoang 2020). In other words, I argue that compulsory heterosexuality in the context of Vietnam finds expressions in the way state policies, along with political institutions and social norms, dictate the utmost importance of building a heterosexual family. What this means for young women in contemporary Vietnam is that they are expected to be(come) a marriageable (heterosexual) woman, who must maintain sexual purity.

Compulsory heterosexuality came up in different ways in Vân Du's narrative. She said that she learnt about what it means to be attracted to someone by witnessing her primary school friend get heartbroken in grade 1. Vân Du said that her friend (whom I will call Hạnh, for the purposes of reference) used to like a person (whom I will call An) that everyone at the time

[28] *Đạo Mẫu*, which is also known as *Đạo Tứ Phủ* [Four Palace religion], came about in the 1400s and is thought to be an Indigenous religion of the Vietnamese (Nguyễn 2007).

was confused about in terms of their gender. Hạnh was attracted to An's gender presentation, as An "*cắt tóc ngắn và nhìn nó rất là giống con trai*" [had short hair and she looked like a boy]; but as soon as she found out that An was a girl, Hạnh became disappointed and changed her target of desire to a boy. It was that this point that Vân Du said she got an idea of what it might feel like to like someone and it not be reciprocated. Vân Du did not speak about An's feeling for Hạnh, but her interpretation of the incident implied that the affection was one-sided. While I do not seek to deny Vân Du's experience, I suggest that her narrative also spoke to Rich's notion of compulsory heterosexuality as same-sex attraction was denied the moment it became visible.

Similar to Vân Du in the way that her learning of (sexual) attraction came from personal observations, Tú told me that she learnt about (heterosexual) romantic relationships via Korean dramas, which began to gain popularity in Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries when she was in secondary school in the early 2000s (Dang 2010). Tú, as I noted earlier, did not have any discussions in her (extended) family about relationship matters. Conversations about sexual attraction, sexual desire, or the sex act were out of the question in her family as well as among her peers. Reflecting on her experience in secondary school, Tú told me she used to idolize boys that were good-looking and performed well in school, as these were the depiction of hegemonic masculinity she observed in Korean dramas. Here, I invoke Connell's (2005) concept of "hegemonic masculinity" to refer to a historically specific, socially constituted form of masculinity, which in this case is embodied by the intellectually superior and aesthetically pleasing man that occupies the hegemonic position in the construction of masculinities in Korean popular culture.[29] Tu did not speak further about what it might mean for her to have such an idealized figure. However, her later experience of dating speaks to certain forms of violence that I discuss in the next chapter. The affective experience of being attracted to

[29] Other virtues such as loyalty, sensibility and having the ability to protect one's (female) partner were also commended as the ideal masculinity in some of the Korean television dramas in the early 2000s (Chae 2014).

someone romantically and/or sexually, in some cases, preluded an engagement in sex. In what follows, I account for my participants' experience of their first sexual encounter.

"Maybe I'll just lose this virginity": The first sexual encounter[30]

The above quotation was taken from Diệp's narrative, whose story of sexual becoming signifies a continuous negotiation with her beliefs, social norms, as well as personal values. Diệp told me that her first sexual encounter was with an expat from the U.S. that she met on Tinder. Diệp was 18 years old at the time:

> *Em chỉ nghĩ là… "okay it's time, maybe I'll just lose this virginity"*[31]*. Tại vì em cảm thấy rất là thoải mái bên cạnh người này. Và em cũng không muốn attach với người này. […] Chỉ muốn là "ok, it's time to experience this shit", thì nó cũng không quá tệ, nó cũng ok. Nó cũng ko quá tệ với em tại vì ông đó cũng caring. Nói chung là cũng kiểu... nice. Thế thôi. Cũng rất nice. […] Nói chung là em cũng cảm thấy là mình ngu.*
>
> I was just thinking that… "okay it's time, maybe I'll just lose this virginity". Because I felt very comfortable around this person. And I didn't want to get attached […] [I] just wanted to be like "okay, it's time to experience this shit", and it wasn't too bad, it was okay. It wasn't too bad for me because he was caring. In general, it was… nice. That's it. [It] was very nice. […] I also felt that I was stupid.

While she immediately had good feelings after engaging in sexual intercourse with the American man, Diệp seemed to regret her decision to a certain extent – as demonstrated in the somewhat abrupt articulation of her own foolishness immediately after describing the experience as "nice". It is unclear whether Diệp regretted her decision at the time it happened, afterward, or upon reflection at the time of the interview: the language that Diệp used to describe what happened was temporally unmarked. After I asked why she felt that way, Diệp

[30] This quote was taken from my interview with Diệp.
[31] This statement was made in English during the interview. I discuss the use of English in my participants' narratives in Chapter 5.

said that she could have had sex with someone she knew rather than with "*một thằng ất ơ*" [a random dude]. She then recounted a relationship that she called her "*mối tình đầu*" [first love] when she was in grade 11. She said she did not want to have sex with her first love as he was about to go to study abroad. The prospect of losing her virginity to someone she had affection for, but was soon to leave, was overbearing for Diệp. She then told me:

> *Thà chịch với thằng ất ơ này đi. Ít ra nó cũng dắt mình đi chơi vui, đi quẩy mấy bữa, thôi mình chịch. Đó cũng là một cái nơi khá là private, đó là cái căn... apartment ở quận 4 á... Ít ra nó cũng đỡ hơn cái khách sạn 60 ngàn một tiếng.*
>
> [I] rather fuck this random person. At least he took me out, going clubbing several times, so we/I can fuck. It was a private space, it was… an apartment in District 4 [in Hồ Chí Minh City]… At least it was still better than a 60.000 VND/hour hotel.

Diệp provided a *rationale* for her decision by making a comparison between losing her virginity to someone that she liked and to a stranger, who made possible some experiences that she could not afford at that point, as a form of exchange. I suggest that it was in this way that Diệu negotiated her conflicting feelings as she reflected upon this experience.

The "60.000 VND/hour hotel" that Diệp mentioned is a type of motel that one can rent by the hour. From my own knowledge, these are usually small motels that are run by families or with minimal employees and services. Legally, people who are under 18 years old are not allowed to register at a hotel; however, the motel administrator often does not keep a close eye upon registration. These motels, in a way, have become the only space that teenagers and young adults can have privacy with their partner, which was the case for Diệu Anh. I wish to refrain from romanticizing or attributing subversive potential to such a space. Rather, I argue that Diệu Anh's and Diệp's accounts spoke to the ongoing negotiation of meaning with which adolescents and young adults engage in their usage of theses spaces, which I discuss further in the following chapter.

Unlike Diệp, Diệu Anh's first sexual encounter was rather a spontaneous experience. She was in grade 9 when she had sex in a cinema with her same-age boyfriend:

> *Lúc tới rạp thì cũng không có ý định gì hết, nhưng mà vô trong rạp rồi thì phim quá chán nên... bắt đầu lại make out. Make out thì chuyện này dẫn tới chuyện kia mà phim này quá dài, nên cuối cùng lại dẫn tới chuyện quan hệ với nhau (cười). Ờ nhưng mà thực sự thì lúc đó thì V cũng không có plan gì mà bạn đó cũng không plan gì nên cũng không có mang condom, nên.. cuối cùng lại dẫn tới chuyện V hoảng loạn sau đó.*
>
> When [we] went to the cinema [we] did not plan anything, but once we were inside the cinema, the movie was too boring so… [we] started to make out. One thing led to another, and the movie was too long, so [we] ended up having sex (laugh). But honestly, at the time I did not have any plan and neither did he so [we] did not bring any condoms, so… [that] led to me panicking [about getting pregnant] afterward.

The way in which Diệu Anh spoke about sex implied that it had happened rather naturally. I argue that Diệu Anh's semantic elaboration of this event conveyed that she was an active agent in a rather smooth engagement that led to sex. Similar expressions such as "*chuyện này dẫn tới chuyện kia*" [one thing leads to another] and/or "*chuyện gì phải tới thì cũng tới*" [what must come will come] also came up in the narratives of Mai, Anh Thuỳ, and Xuân on their first sexual encounter. These expressions, however, were used in ways that positioned them as ambivalent subjects: while the subjects did not appear to be active agents of change, it is also possible that they did exert agency within a restrictive context. The restrictive context here was the discursive construction of sexual intercourse as an inevitable event in a dating event and/or romantic relationship. Sex, for instance, has been discursively and affectively situated within a narrative of marriage, love, and romance. That is, sex should in one way or another be an expression of affection (P.A. Nguyen 2007). In that sense, I argue against a linear association of the discourse of sex as an inevitable act with the absence of agency of the individual woman.

Differing from my other participants, Linh, when asked about her first time having sex, smiled and exclaimed: "*nó là một sự lãng phí của cuộc đời em*" [it was a waste of my life]. She then went on to tell me the story of how she lost her virginity when her boyfriend in grade 11 "fingered" her.[32] I asked Linh why she thought it was a waste and Linh lowered her voice to say that "*mất trinh trong lúc làm tình nó sẽ erotic hơn*" [losing my virginity while having sex would be more erotic]. Linh stated that she was influenced by hentai, which depicts the first sexual encounter as a romantic and sublime experience. It is noteworthy that Linh's definition of losing her virginity is tied to the tearing of the hymen, regardless of the kind of sex act that precipitated it. This is slightly different from my other participants' perception, some of whom assumes the central role of coitus. Some of my participants have never engaged in sexual intercourse but have experience with non-coital behaviors and/or masturbation. Those who did have sexual relationships counted their first sexual intercourse as their first (hetero)sexual encounter, despite having non-coital experiences prior to that. Some of my participants believed that non-coital behaviors are not *real* sex – a logic that not only centralizes and sustains heteronormativity but also places the utmost emphasis on the phallus, a phenomenon that will be further examined in Chapter 5.

The experiences of having one's first sexual encounter that I have accounted for so far were only a few selective examples and by no means represent all of my participants' *becoming*. In presenting the selected few, I have sought to map out the diverse and complex experience of the first sex that is experienced, negotiated, and reiterated within the historical, sociocultural, and political context of contemporary Vietnam.

[32] Linh used this term to describe the sexual act of having her boyfriend caressing her vulva and vagina with his hands.

Conclusion

This chapter mapped out the various processes of sexual subject formation as narrated in my interviews with young, unmarried Vietnamese women. I have argued that these processes included a number of key dimensions, around which this chapter has been structured: 1) negotiation with one's family, through which social norms and collective history are implicated; 2) the diverse materials through which one learns about sex and romantic relationships; 3) the experience of having affection and/or sexual attraction to someone; and 4) one's first sexual encounter. In mapping out these processes, I have demonstrated the diverse and different experiences of becoming sexual subjects which, I argue, are deeply implicated in specific historical, temporal, and spatial contexts.

Throughout the chapter, I have also illustrated the way in which my participants negotiated the silencing and censoring of information around sex and sexuality in contemporary Vietnamese society, as well as the demoralization of premarital sex through the way virginity has been discursively valued. The silencing of sex and sexuality manifested in the lack of discussions on the topic both in private and public spaces. Indeed, sex education in schools remains very limited in Vietnam to the present day. Amid these challenges, my participants explained that they came to learn about sex and relationships through various cultural products, such as (educational) texts, graphic novels, and pornography. Such experiences were deeply intertwined with their gender and class position. I have also illustrated the varied experiences of having one's first sexual encounter, through which my participants had to negotiate their own beliefs, class position, as well as their imaginative expectations of sex and sexuality. Negotiation, therefore, involved an expression of a contextually contingent agency – one that must be understood within the context that the subject is situated. In the following chapter, I will focus on the ways in which my participants negotiate(d) various forms of violence and disruptive forces that (re)shaped their sexual subjectivities.

Chapter 4: Subject interrupted

This chapter presents various accounts of *violence*, which was a very prominent theme within most of my participants' narratives. The violence that I will discuss does not always fall strictly into the categories and normative understandings of physical, emotional, and sexual violence. Informed by Foucault's (1988, 18) conception on technologies of power, I use the term "quotidian violence" to refer to institutionalized everyday tactics of governing the (sexual) subject that include, but not limited to, surveillance, censorship, and silencing. In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which my participants negotiated these forms of quotidian violence in their everyday lives, as well as the violence that was pertinent to specific sexual counters. I argue for an understanding of violence as a disruptive force that (re)orientates sexual subjects and that the on-going process of negotiating different forms of violence is central to the sexual subjects-in-becoming.

In her book, *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed (2006) writes that in order to recognize that one is orientated, one needs to first experience *dis*orientation. She claims that "[i]t is in this mode of disorientation that one might begin to wonder: What does it mean to be orientated?" (Ahmed 2006, 6). I invoke Ahmed's (2006) question about what (dis)orientation means to argue that disruption is essential to the mode of negotiation of young Vietnamese women as subjects-in-becoming. In theorizing orientation, Ahmed (2010) argues that we turn to or away from certain objects as we are affected by them. As such, in making sense of experiences of violence and the way in which they affect sexual subjectivities, I draw upon conceptualizations of emotions and theories of affect proposed by Ahmed (2014) and Tomkins (2008).

In what follows, I categorize my participants' experiences of negotiating: 1) everyday violence such as surveillance and censorship; 2) the affective experience of shame resulting

from the discursive condemnation of young women's sexuality; and 3) event-based violence such as incidents of harassment, assault, and rape. While I understand that these categories are not all inclusive and that the distinctions between them are by no means straightforward, I argue that it is necessary to categorize different forms of violence to best convey the ongoing and pervasive nature of violence beyond individual and clearly identifiable acts. In doing so, I seek not to classify any acts of violence as more severe or harmful than others; rather, I mobilize Kelly's (1988) concept of a "continuum" in her research on sexual violence to advocate for an understanding of quotidian violence and event-based violence such as harassment, assault, and rape as parts of this continuum. This understanding, I argue, helps to unsettle the distinction between everyday violence and incidents of sexual violence, and shed lights on the intersecting manifestations of structural, sexual, and everyday forces of disruption. My aim is not to emphasize the act of violence itself, but in the process of giving space for detailed accounts of violence, I seek to pay attention to my participants' material, embodied, and affective experiences of negotiation. In doing so, I argue that a part of the process of *becoming* is a never-ending negotiation with such instances of disruption.

Negotiating everyday surveillance and censorship

Everyday surveillance and censorship took different forms and shapes in my participants' narratives. They ranged from being monitored in terms of what they did, who they met and where they hung out, to what material they were allowed to consume. For instance, Vân Du's parents used to cover her eyes whenever there was an intimate scene, such as two characters kissing, aired on television. Such an act of censoring what is (not) allowed to be seen or known by a young woman was not uncommon among my participants' parents, as I discussed in the previous chapter.

Acts of surveillance should be seen not as individual practices, but as parts of the Vietnamese state's regime of control over young women's sexuality. Diệu Anh told me that her mother used to read her diary when she was in primary school and listened to her conversations on the telephone. On one occasion, Diệu Anh's mother gave her diary to her schoolteacher because she had written that she liked a boy at school. The diary was then passed from one teacher to another and was finally handed to the headmaster. Diệu Anh recalled that one morning at a school-wide gathering, the headmaster said in front of the whole body of students that there were some pupils that had "*tư tưởng không được lành mạnh*" [an unhealthy mentality]. The adjective "*lành mạnh*" [healthy/sound], which is usually ascribed to the body or mind, is used in this context to refer to consumption practices or (sexual) behaviors. Healthy practices (of the body and/or mind) are those that are prescribed by the state and can be seen in cultural campaigns that have been orchestrated by the Vietnamese state since the 1990s.

In the 1990s, when my interview participants were growing up, various cultural campaigns were initiated by government-sanctioned mass organizations, including the "*Phong trào xây dựng gia đình văn hoá*" (Building cultured families campaign) and "*Phong trào phòng chống tệ nạn xã hội*" (Preventing social evils campaign). These campaigns were inaugurated as a response to growing concerns about the erosion of traditional family values in the post-*Đổi Mới* era (Pettus 2004; Wilcox 2000). In 1990, the People's Committee of Hồ Chí Minh City passed the Directive, "*Về Việc Đẩy Mạnh Cuộc Vận Động Xây Dựng Nếp Sống Mới và Gia Đình Văn Hoá Mới*" [On the Promotion of the Campaign for Building New Life and New Cultured Family] (23/CT-UB), which outlined the required activities and campaigns at the municipal level. One of the clauses in the Directive specifically targeted "*tụ điểm tệ nạn xã hội như mãi dâm, xì ke, cờ bạc, bói toán*" (locations of social evils such as prostitution, drug, gambling, divination).

In a similar line of logic, the preventing social evils campaign was initiated in 1996 after the Vietnamese government passed Decree 87-CP titled "*Về Tăng Cường Quản Lý Các Hoạt Động Văn Hoá và Dịch Vụ Văn Hoá, Đẩy Mạnh Bài Trừ Một Số Tệ Nạn Xã Hội Nghiêm Trọng*" [On Enhanced Management of Cultural Activities and Cultural Services, Eliminating The Perilous Social Evils] to prohibit the consumption and distribution of sexually explicit material and prostitution. Wilcox (2000, 15) suggests that this Decree was an "attempt to fight against decadent and corrupt Western values" as well as to "reinvent the Vietnamese Communist Party as the gate-keeper of Vietnamese tradition". Families that complied with the state's policies were rewarded with the title of "*Gia đình văn hóa"* (cultured family),[33] which was determined on the basis of participation in the state's family planning policy and in the workforce, fulfilment of their obligations as citizens, and building harmonious relationships between family members. In this sense, I argue that healthy practices and bodies, in a sexually specific way, are implicated in what is seen to constitute a cultured family.

Returning to Diệu Anh's narrative, she expressed her frustration and fluster both verbally and physically as she told me about the incident of being denounced in front of her peers by the headmaster: "*Cái lúc đó tui kiểu, trời má, có nhất thiết phải vậy hông á (cười và nhìn đi chỗ khác). Ủa, có phải là… có phải tui đi bán mại dâm hay gì đâu.*" [At that point I was like, oh gosh, does it have to be like this (laughs and looks away). It wasn't like… it wasn't like I did sex work or something.] Here, Diệu Anh sought to establish herself as a respectable woman as opposed to the Vietnamese sex worker, whose occupation and mere existence are deemed despicable. This form of juxtaposition, I argue, speaks to a gendered discourse of respectability in relation to sexuality in the very specific historical context of Vietnam. In his

[33] The campaign and its policy remain active today and are relatively unchanged since they were first written. See the following Decree: Chính Phủ. 2018. Nghị Định Quy Định về Xét Tặng Danh Hiệu "Gia Đình Văn Hoá"; "Thôn Văn Hoá", "Làng Văn Hoá", "Ấp Văn Hoá", "Bản Văn Hoá", "Tổ Dân Phố Văn Hoá" [Decree Stipulating the Awarding of the Title "Cultured Family"; "Cultured Village", "Cultured Hamlet", "Cultured Neighborhood"]. 122/2018/NĐ-CP.

work on German nation-building projects in the 20th century, Mosse (1997) argues that respectability is forged in an alliance with nationalism in ways that subject sexual attitudes and behaviors to both state and personal surveillance. In particular, Mosse argues, ideals of manliness and their effect on the place of women in Europe since the 18th century have been central to the growing importance of respectability for the middle-class, who sought to establish their political standing through notions of morality. In the context of postwar Vietnam, prostitution was regarded as a remnant of the neocolonial, imperial presence of America; thus, good proletariat subjects of the new regime, and eventually the growing middle-class women, ought to be sexually reserved. The socialist government of Vietnam at the time branded sex workers as those that "had been stripped of human dignity as they were commodified into whores" for American soldiers during the Vietnam War (Nguyễn-võ 2002, 131).[34] Such positioning of sex workers as those who lack human dignity conflates sex work with immorality; hence sex workers are thought of as ontologically immoral beings, and so not holding the same standing as respectable proletarian subjects in the eyes of the state. While the communist ideology avowed by the postwar Vietnamese government is barely upheld today, the discourse of respectability that dictated acceptable sexual behavior and attitudes continues to demonize sex work. As such, I suggest that Diệu Anh, in juxtaposing herself to sex workers, sought to establish her own respectability as a way to negotiate the public denouncement that she received as a child.

Another way in which my participants negotiated the habitual silencing of discussions on sex and relationships, the demonization of young women's sexuality, and the prohibition of any romantic and sexual involvements, as I have touched on the previous chapter, was to hide or lie about their experiences of dating and having sexual relationships to their parents. Linh,

[34] Interestingly, the sex industry rose in the 1990s along with its pivotal role in facilitating the growth of private businesses and Vietnam's economy more broadly after the transition to a market economy in 1986. While benefiting from the sex industry, the Vietnamese government devised an anti-prostitution campaign that demonized sex work and punished sex workers (Nguyễn-võ 2002).

for instance, lied to her parents whenever she went out with her boyfriend. She, however, related this to her parents' concern that she would be distracted from studying if she was involved romantically with a boy. When Linh did not maintain her high grades in school, her parents would question whether it was because of boys. She told me her parents did not like it when she lied about going out with a boy, which she believed to be a justified reason for her parents' anger toward her:

> *[…] bố thì giải thích đó là tại vì... nếu như mà cái việc nào đó mà em làm mà em cảm thấy không tự tin để nói tức là nó có nguy hiểm gì đó trong đó, thì bố mới sợ là có chuyện gì đó nguy hiểm sẽ xảy ra, cho nên bố mới ghét. Bố mẹ chỉ phản ứng... tương đối negative khi mà em nói dối về cái việc em hẹn hò. Còn nếu như mà em nói thật thì mọi thứ bố mẹ ok không vấn đề gì hết.*
>
> […] my dad explained that it was because… if there was something I did that I didn't feel confident enough to talk about it, it means that there was something sketchy about it, and so he's afraid that something dangerous would happen. That's why he hates it [when I lie]. My parents only react… negatively when I lied about dating. If I were to tell them the truth, they would be okay about it.

Linh recounted her father's reasoning for why he would be angry at her: a line of reasoning that follows a neoliberal logic of individualization (Ong 2006). Put differently, Linh's father's explanation held Linh accountable for any information that she did not share with him while disregarding the structural conditions that provided Linh with limited options. Linh seemed to believe that her parents did not forbid her from engaging in romantic relationships, and that if she could be honest with them, then there would not be a problem.

When I asked Linh why she felt the need to lie, therefore, Linh's response spoke to a larger process of the demonization of sex and young women's sexuality with which she was negotiating. She explained that she was afraid that her parents might know that she had physical contact with her boyfriend. Linh said that she "*chỉ có tới khoảng lớp 12 mà em đủ lớn, đủ can*

đảm rồi em mới lâu lâu kiểu nói thật là.... 'ờ con sẽ đi hẹn hò với bạn... bạn trai... nhưng mà cũng có những người khác đi theo nữa'. Em lúc nào cũng phải rào rào như vậy" [only when I was in grade 12 was I enough of a grownup and had enough courage to occasionally tell them the truth like… 'oh I will go out with my… boyfriend… but there are also other people there.' I always had to set the scene like that.] This was because having her parents know that she was spending time alone with her boyfriend would compromise her respectability. While this can be understood as a form of internalization in which Linh accepted the moral standard placed on women's sexuality, I argue that a more fruitful way to perceive this is through a structural view of the context in which the sexual subject is permitted to exist and act.

Negotiating the affective experience of shame

In the previous section, I situated the discursive condemnation of young women's sexuality within the historical and sociopolitical context of Vietnam. In this section, I seek to shift the focus to my participants' embodied experience of shame and the ways in which they negotiated their affective experiences subsequently.

Diệp was one of the few interviewees who spoke further about how she negotiated the discursive value placed upon a woman's virginity, which I briefly discussed in the previous chapter.[35] In the aftermath of her first sexual encounter, Diệp said she had "*cảm thấy tội lỗi*" [felt guilty] toward herself. She told me that she used to ponder, "*giờ mình mất trinh rồi có ai cưới mình nữa không*" [now that I have lost my virginity, is anyone going to marry me?]. Mai, who also shared similar experiences, told me that "*sau khi have sex xong tao cũng tự nhiên có một cái cảm giác tội lỗi vô cùng*" [after having sex I also had an extreme sense of guilt]. This feeling of guilt, I argue, codified a woman's experience of sex as a (morally) wrong act.

[35] Existing scholarship on sex, sexuality, and gender has provided extensive discussions of the discursive values placed on a woman's virginity in relation to virtue and marriageability (e.g., M. Do and Fu 2010; Drummond and Rydström 2004; Earl 2015; Khuat 1998; Rydstrøm 2009).

After reiterating her thought of not being able to marry, Diệp quickly added that this was one of the "toxic" discourses around virginity and sex in Vietnam that she believed at the time. Such discourses often demonize young women's sexuality, characterize virginity as a measure of a women's value, and label premarital sex as an immoral and indecent act (Drummond and Rydström 2004; Rydstrøm 2001, 2009), as I have discussed thus far. It was not clear how Diệp came to change her thinking on the importance of virginity as she did not go into detail. Yet such labelling of the dominant discourse on sexual purity as "toxic", I argue, helped Diệp came to terms with her sexual experience. It can be understood that the process of negotiation and coming to terms with such an experience of guilt entails detaching morality from sexual purity.

The condemnation of premarital sex not only plays out discursively in the silencing of sex and the demoralization of individuals who engage in such behavior. It also shows up in spaces such as the "60.000 VND/hour hotel" (that came up in Diệp's and Diệu Anh's narrative) – a space where young adults can have sex outside of wedlock, as I discussed in the previous chapter, is thought of as improper and cheap; therefore, it is seen as not suitable for young middle-class girls/women. Diệu Anh spoke about her conflicting feeling when going to these hotels with her boyfriend when she was in high school:

> *Lúc đó thằng đó nó đặt phòng thôi chứ V chỉ dám lén lút né sau lưng thằng đó, chứ cũng không dám ngẩn cao đầu mà đi nữa (cười). Cũng tự biết mình sai. Ừ nhưng mà không có gì sai. Không có gì sai hết (laugh).*
>
> He booked the room, and I was just hiding behind his back, I couldn't walk with my head held high (laugh). [I] was aware that I was doing something wrong. But there was nothing wrong [about it]. There was nothing wrong (laugh).

I argue that Diệu Anh's experience of "hiding" behind her boyfriend alluded to her embodied experience of shame. In feeling ashamed, the body shrinks and withdraws, as was evident when

Diệu Anh tried to mask herself. Probyn (2010, 72) suggests that shame can be etymologically traced back to the Goth word "Scham", which means to cover the face. This experience is far from singular, as the discursive condemnation of young women's sexuality works in collaboration with the moral values placed upon a woman's virginity to make possible the biopolitical schema of regulating women's bodies.[36] When Diệu Anh quickly shifted her narrative to reflecting upon the experience that she later believed to be "*bình thường*" [normal], I argue that Diệu Anh actively negotiated her own belief system and social world. To categorize the experience of going to love motels with her boyfriend as "normal", which is to also disassociate such an event with shame, requires not only a shift in values but also an understanding and acceptance of one own's sexuality.

The affective experience of shame was similarly raised when I asked Mai if she thought her experience of sex and sexuality had changed over the past couple of years. Mai believed that the feeling of shame when it came to masturbation had lessened. A few years ago, Mai said:

> *Mỗi lần sau khi tao masturbate xong tao đều có một cái cảm giác disgusting, vô cùng disgusting luôn. Lúc đó xong tao phải xoá hết tất cả những cái clip đó mặc dù tao sẽ download nó lại vào một ngày không xa. Nhưng mà lúc đấy tao cảm giác như tao không bao giờ muốn làm lại chuyện này nữa.*
>
> I always feel disgusting after every single time I masturbated, very disgusting. I had to delete all of the [pornographic] video clips although I always downloaded them again soon afterward. But at the time I felt like I never wanted to do this again.

When I asked Mai toward whom or what she felt disgusting, Mai clarified that it was both her act of masturbating and herself as a person. It is thus worth noting that it was not only the action that Mai felt contempt towards, but also her being as a sexual subject. Ahmed (2014, 85), in

[36] I refer to biopolitics here as a form of governance of the bodies of the individual as well as the population at large, as in Foucault's (1978) theorization.

theorizing disgust, suggests that it "brings the body perilously close to an object only then to pull away from the object in the registering of the proximity as an offence". Mai's feeling of disgust was a form of self-contempt, rather than one that was directed toward an Other. Taking Mai's experience as a point of departure, I ask: what happens then when the body cannot be pulled away as the object of abjection is one's own being?

The affective experience of shame that I have discussed thus far, I argue, works to create a shameful subject – one who engages in sexual activities (prior to marriage). Shame, as Tomkins (2008, 351) puts it, "is the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression and of alienation". I invoke Tomkins' (2008) theorization of shame, and affect more broadly, to suggest that the experience of guilt and self-contempt in the aftermath of sexual experiences is activated in response to both an internalized sexual morality and structurally produced conditions that restrain sexual engagements. As I outlined in the previous section, the structural conditions here are institutions of power-knowledge (Foucault 2003), including government sponsored cultural campaigns, family policies, education systems infused with moral codes on sexual purity, medical institutions that discipline deviant behaviors, along with the help of mass media.[37] N.T. Tran (2018b), albeit focusing on 17th- and 18th-century Vietnam, suggests that the state's efforts to control women's bodies and their sexual activities are inextricably tied to socioeconomic and political stability. Tran's work, while exploring a different historical period, sheds light on the relationship between state politics, gender, sexuality, and individual survival strategies. What I have sought to demonstrate thus far in this chapter is the collaboration of different institutions of power-knowledge that structurally produce conditions through which shame is evoked when one engages in sexual activities outside of state's

[37] A quick Google search for the key words "*quan hệ tình dục trước hôn nhân*" in Vietnamese [sexual intercourse prior to marriage] provides more than 300 million results with almost all articles on the first page, dating from 2018 until now, from major Vietnamese new sources such as *Tuổi Trẻ* and *VnExpress*. These results point to the consequences of having pre-marital sex on (mostly women's) morality, physical and sexual health (e.g., K. Anh, Triệu, and Phương 2018; H.P. Anh 2020).

purview. The gender dynamic of these processes reflects through the sole focus on women's bodies and conducts as targets for persecution.

In arguing that shame is institutionally produced, I do not simultaneously argue for a lack of individual agency nor deny the agentic experience of my participants. Rather, I seek to emphasize the structural conditions that are equally productive in the individual affective experience of shame. What follows such experiences, in my participants' narratives that I have discussed thus far, points to the agentic negotiation that I wish to focus on for the remainder of this chapter. Mai, for instance, while being beware of her self-contempt, noted that she will continue to please herself sexually. This experience of negotiation, rather than being an isolated incident, is a continuous engagement: each time Mai sees pornography and/or masturbates, she actively negotiates the affective experience of shame that is structurally produced and corporeally experienced. In suggesting that affect can work on both a structural and personal level, I seek to allude to the possible ways in which affect can (re)orientate the subject, which I will explore in the following section.

(Re)orienting the subject after sexual violence

In this section, I focus on what I term event-based violence, including sexual harassment, coercion, and rape. In narrating my participant's experiences of violence as such, I seek to illustrate the ways in which the subject is (re)orientated as violence affects the corporeal, psychic and, in turn, the processes of becoming.

On sexual harassment and assault

A number of my participants told me that they were sexually harassed and assaulted by their male cousins when they were younger. This came up within Diệp's narrative when she told me about how she came to know about gender differences. She was 7 years old when that happened, yet it was not until much later that Diệp identified the incident as sexual assault.

Diệp seemed to be actively trying to forget the incident as she told me that she wanted to "*để nó qua đi*" [move on] – meaning to not hold on to the assault anymore; she also told me that the memory kept coming back to her, but she does not talk about it to anyone. Diệp briefly told me that she did not really know how to feel about it and did not go into a lot of detail about what happened. I did not pursue the matter further as Diệp took more pauses between her sentences, as she struggled to reiterate the event, suggesting that the experience of assault was a *trauma* for her. Traumatic events are, as Caruth (1996, 6) argues, "not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known." Trauma, in that sense, is not located in the experience of violence itself, but the way its "*unassimilated* nature" facilitates the returning of such violence (Caruth 1996, 4), as Diệp's memory returned to haunt her.

Simultaneously, Diệp expressed a sense of sympathy toward her cousin as she said that he was merely curious. Diệp told me that she never spoke about the incident with older family members as she believed it would have not made any difference. A similar logic can be seen in the case of Diệu Anh who was harassed by her male cousin (who I will call Đạt) when she was 14 years old. Diệu Anh, after the incident, spoke to Đạt's sister about what happened, only for her to defend Đạt and ask Diệu Anh not to speak about the incident to their mother. Diệu Anh later told her mother about the harassment and was asked what clothes she was wearing at the time. While Diệu Anh expressed her anger about the responses that she had received to me, she also said that felt that she could not have done anything else about the situation. In other words, Diệu Anh's family and relatives either made her feel responsible for the harassment, encouraged her to disregard the incident, or attempted to silence her.

Such reactions from family, I argue, are not singular. In acknowledging the commonality of these experiences, I am by no means advocating for, nor justifying, such problematics responses. Instead, I am suggesting that such responses are made possible through apparatuses of kinship, family harmony, and honor. T.H. Nguyen (2012), in her ethnographic

account of rape disclosure in Vietnam, points to the low rate of reporting rape and convictions in the country. T.H. Nguyen (2012) suggests that in the case of rape, the idea of family honor is used as a distinct patriarchal tool to stop the victim from pursuing legal prosecution. In cases that involve the rape of women, the incident is often imagined as a shameful matter, having social consequences for the victim's respectability and marriageability, and bringing dishonor to the family (T.H. Nguyen 2012). I argue that the idea of family honor was similarly mobilized in the response of Diệu Anh's extended family and was what Diệp assumed to have happened if she spoke.

Linh's account of harassment, while seemingly different from than that of Diệu Anh and Diệp, shares a similar thread of "feeling responsible". At the end of our first interview, I asked Linh if she was ever harassed or assaulted. She looked down for a moment and said that "*em đã từng fantasize về việc bị quấy rối rồi cho nên em... cảm thấy nó là một cái gì đó em expected, và ở một thời điểm nào đó trong quá khứ em còn cảm thấy kiểu excited về cái đó*" [I used to fantasize about being sexually harassed so I… think it was something that I expected, and at some point in the past I used to feel excited about it]. Linh then went on to tell me the story of her cousin, who is 10 years older than her, harassing her when she was 16 years old. Linh told me when she visited her uncle and stayed over, her cousin "*ép em blow job*" [forced me to perform a blow job]. Linh then quickly rectified that "*ảnh chỉ là dụ em blow job thôi*" [he was just enticing me to give him a blow job]. She said she went on to do what he asked but he quickly stopped after starting penetration. When I asked Linh for further clarification of what happened, Linh said:

> *Ảnh dụ thôi, với lại em cũng không có phản ứng gì hết, em cũng nghe theo... cho nên là ảnh mới... kiểu được nước làm tới. Tại em nhớ lúc đó là em đang nằm trên giường em đọc truyện... Xong rồi em cũng nằm ở một cái vị trí nó hơi là seduce. Tại vì trước khi mà ảnh làm bất cứ một cái thứ gì với em thì em đã sense được là ảnh có ý đồ với em... […]*

> He was just enticing me, and I didn't really resist, I was allowing him… so he… kept going. Because I remember that I was lying in bed reading manga… I was lying in a position that was a bit seductive. Because before he did anything to me, I already knew that he wanted to do something.

Linh pointed to her "position" in bed at the beginning of her story. In saying that she was aware of her cousin's intention, that she did not stop him, and that she was lying down in a certain way, Linh implied that she shared the responsibility in "allowing" such incident to happen. I argue that Linh's rhetoric can be understood as a speech act of self-blaming – one that is confounded within ideas of family honor, respectability, and gender norms. As mentioned above, a woman who is raped or abused is considered a shameful subject. The issue of family honor, as T.H. Nguyen (2012) posits, further arises when the perpetrator is a relative or kin to the family. As such, in narratives of harassment such as that of Linh, to not imagine oneself as a victim, but as an ambiguously active agent that *failed* to protect oneself from bodily violation and thus to blame oneself for it, can be understood as a rhetorical tool devised in response to the prevalent pressure of upholding family honor and one's own respectability.

On rape and coercion

Among the eight participants that I interviewed, Mai and Diệp spoke to me about their experience of being raped. "*Hiếp dâm*" is the Vietnamese term for rape, among several others such as "*cưỡng dâm*" and "*cưỡng bức tình dục*" [sexual coercion]; the latter can also be used to refer to rape. In order to produce a more in-depth analysis, I will focus solely on Mai's account of violence in this section. Mai told me that she once met up with a Canadian expat (who I will call Jim) that she met on Tinder in HCMC. Mai did not specify the time at which this happened, but the chronology of her narrative suggests that she was 22 or 23 years old at the time. On their second date, Jim invited her to come to his apartment so that he could cook for her. Only when Mai arrived at his place did she realize that he was not prepared to cook.

Instead, Jim took her to a restaurant for dinner and then back to his apartment. Mai said it was then that they were supposed to have sex:

> *Ông ấy kiểu không có mang bao, nhưng mà vẫn kiểu đè tao ra ấy… Xong kiểu vẫn rất là pushy… Lúc đó tao đã kiểu bảo là tao không muốn, nhưng mà ổng vẫn kiểu đẩy vào luôn. Xong tao không phản kháng gì nữa. Tại vì lúc đó tao… Giờ ngẫm lại thì that's, that's rape. Yeah. Nhưng mà… lúc đó tao đã suy nghĩ là tại vì tao… ở đây rồi, và tại vì tao đã đồng ý cái việc cởi đồ, cho nên cái việc mà tao bị ổng… cưỡng, cưỡng bức như thế thì nó là điều… hiển nhiên hay sao ấy. Tao cũng không biết, tại vì… Nhưng mà tao biết là nếu mà tao kể cái đấy cho bất kì ai nghe thì những cái reaction của họ sẽ kiểu như: nhưng mà mày vác xác đến đấy cơ mà, xong mày còn để cho nó kiểu thế này thế nọ cơ mà, thì cái việc đấy cũng có là gì đâu.*
>
> He didn't bring any condoms, but he still forced me down… [he] was very pushy… I told him I didn't want [to have sex], but he still pushed in. So I just stopped resisting. Because I was… Now that I think back, I think I was raped. But… at that time I thought that because I… was there, and because I agreed to undress, so when I was… coerced/raped by him it was like an… obvious thing as if. I don't know, because… But I knew that if I told this to anyone, their reactions would be like: but you went there yourself, then you let him do this and that, so that [being rape] was inevitable.

There was a sense of agony lingering in Mai's voice when she told me she stopped fighting against Jim. It was a moment of helplessness in which that Mai knew she could not get out of the situation. While realizing that she was coerced into doing something she did not want nor agree to, Mai implied that she did not know it was rape until later on. Mai seemed to blame herself in the immediate aftermath of the incident when she said that being forced to have unprotected sex was a sequential event of her coming to Jim's apartment. While Mai's tone of voice and intonation suggested that she did not believe in this line of argument, she demonstrated that she was aware that this was a logic that is commonly upheld – that sexual

intercourse is bound to happened if a woman goes to a private place with a man. In other words, to arrive at the space itself can be taken as a form of agreement to having sex, as it is often discursively constructed by print media. T.H. Nguyen (2012, 39) also suggests that to speak of rape in the Vietnamese context is to "invite stigma and social exclusion" both to the victim and their extended family. For such reasons, Mai told me she had not spoken about this incident to anyone else prior to the interview.

The issue at hand is that Mai's refusal to have sex without protection was denied. It was in this moment that consent was explicitly not given, and the body was violated. While the cultural script on sex, private space, and consent might speak to the patriarchal cis-heterosexual culture in Vietnam, Mai's experience of rape, I argue, occurred at the intersection of gender, class, and race (Crenshaw 1991; Taylor 2011). Mai later told me that she could not just leave Jim's apartment before the sexual encounter. She felt like she owed Jim something as he had taken her out for dinner. While it can be argued that heterosexual dating norms often posit the act of paying for the (female) partner as a benchmark of (hegemonic) masculinity (Connell 2005), it cannot be ruled out that Jim, as a Canadian expat who could afford to travel to Vietnam, had more (financial) resources than Mai. Such resources also arrive at spaces that people like Jim inhabit as conditions of coloniality continue to structure the asymmetric flow of capital globally (Quijano 2007). To be a white man in HCMC, as a space that is orientated toward *institutional whiteness* (Ahmed 2007) enables Jim to behave in ways that a non-white man would not be structurally supported to. The whiteness that I refer to here can be understood as an institutionalized structure that centers and privileges white bodies, facilitating to take up spaces and expand more than others (Ahmed 2007). In terms of the racial dynamics of sexual violence, I am by no means turning to identity politics in a reductive and essentialist manner.[38]

[38] Crenshaw (1991) argues, and I also contend, that identity politics do not need to be dismantled but need to be reworked for a more critical understanding of the ways in which multiple identities intersect at different sites. This understanding moves toward a critical use of intersectionality as a theory and methodology (Mackinnon 2013; McCall 2005), which is also a move away from a reliance on essentialist identity categories.

Rather, I suggest that there is a power difference between Mai and Jim that is produced by histories of colonialism, experiences of war, and the asymmetric nature of the flow of global capital, as I discussed in Chapter 1. In this sense, I speak to the intersection of race, class, and gender underpinning this account of violence in its embodied and material realities.

To return to Mai's narrative, Jim's coercion did not end at the point of sexual assault: he then subtly obstructed Mai from urinating. After the incident of rape, Mai stayed at Jim's apartment while he went out to see his friends, after which she realized that he had intentionally locked the bathroom door as he would like her to hold off from urinating. She told me before he left the apartment that he had made Mai drink an excessive amount of water. The very act of deceiving Mai into drinking water and locking the bathroom's door without Mai knowing left Mai in a position where she had very little control over her surroundings. While it was not clear if apartment door was also locked, as Mai's narrative evolved, she implied that she was put in a situation where she could not leave the room. In this sense, Jim assumed the position of director, controller, and abuser (Barlow and Walklate 2022; Hill 2019). As I have argued above, it is not by chance that Jim arrived at such position. This is, however, not to say that Jim held little responsibility for his action. Rather, acts of violence such as this one should be understood as individually enacted forces within the intersection of structural sexism, racism, and classism in specific contexts.

Although Jim returned to the apartment after Mai texted and asked him to open the bathroom door, he then insisted on watching her urinate. Mai raised her voice and exclaimed "What the fuck is that. Oh my god what the fuck." She felt pressured into doing what he asked but then she could not urinate while being watched: "*Tao căng thẳng vãi*" [I was so fucking stressed]. Mai had wanted to leave the place immediately after but she could not, as it was not safe for her to be on the street at such an hour. Mai told me that she left in the early morning when Jim was still asleep and the street was safe. After this incident, Mai said that she had stopped talking and meeting with men on online dating applications and that she had no

intention of dating anyone for a long time. The violence enacted upon her, I argue, was thus felt not only on a corporeal level, but it also reorientated the way Mai negotiated the space around her. Online dating applications, which used to be a space that Mai turned to for more expansive opportunities, became a space of terror.

In discussing Mai's experience of rape, I have sought to shed light on the corporeal, affective, and psychic experience of violence. In doing so, I also refrain from comparing the severity of different forms of violence that I have accounted for in this chapter. Rather, I argue that rape, assault, and harassment affect subjects in different ways than everyday violence.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the ways in which my participants negotiated quotidian forms of violence such as structural surveillance and censorship, the affective experience of shame, as well as incidents of sexual violence such as harassment and rape. Accounts of everyday violence and incidents of sexual violence should be understood as parts of a continuum as they intersect and affect the subjects in different ways. In negotiating surveillance and censorship, my participants had to conceal their experiences of dating and having sexual relationships from their families. The discursive condemnation of young women's sexuality, which has been systematically produced and strengthened within the infrastructure of state politics, education, medical assess, and mass media, has structurally induced feelings of guilt, shame, and disgust in relation to sex and sexuality for my participants. Such affective experiences work to create the shameful subject – that is, one who is engages in sexual activities prior to marriage. While one of my participants came to disassociate sexuality with morality in response to the moral condemnation of premarital sex, others engaged in an ongoing process of negotiation with self-abjection.

I argue that violence in its various material and affective forms can be understood as a force of disruption: as Ahmed (2010) suggests, to be affected is to be orientated to a certain direction. In that sense, the process of negotiation with violence can be understood as a form of orientation, through which the subject is constantly (re)orientated. In cases of sexual violence such as harassment, assault and rape, my participants narrated a logic of self-blame from family, relatives, and in some cases, themselves, in that they held themselves accountable for the incident of violence. This logic is confounded within ideas of family honor, respectability, and gender norms. This logic, I argue, also bypasses the intersecting structures of gender, race, and class that facilitate violence. In the following chapter, I will further account for the ways in which structures of gender, race, and class shape sexual subjectivities as well as my participants' negotiation with sex, sexuality, and gender.

Chapter 5: Sexual subjects-in-becoming

In this chapter, I discuss the processes of change in my participants' narratives on sexuality, sex, and gender, through which I seek to theorize the concept of *sexual subject-in-becoming*. I will examine several themes centering on the corporeal, affective, discursive, and imaginative negotiation with sex and sexuality. Building upon my discussion in the previous chapter, I illustrate the ongoing processes of negotiation in this chapter, which are located within the specific historical, sociocultural, and political context of contemporary Vietnam.

The experiences I reiterate below are not only diverse, but also orientated in different directions. Drawing upon Bao's (2018) work on the queer subject in contemporary China, as well as my participant's narratives, I argue that *becoming* cannot be understood in a liberal discourse through which a narrative of linear progress is assumed. In demonstrating the sexual subject-in-becoming of my participants, I argue against any forms of exoticization which assumes an image of the oriental "backward" Vietnamese women. Rather than referring to a (few) specific text(s), I speak here of the tendency to categorize subjects, experiences, and cultures from the Global South as repressed and backward – a model put forward by white liberal feminist thinkers of the 1970s in the US (Connell 2014). While this approach has been challenged in the past few decades by postcolonial theory, black feminist thought, and queer critique of color (e.g., Alarcón 2014; Anzaldúa 1987; Hill Collins 1990; Lugones 2010; Mohanty 2003), I argue that such a dualistic paradigm of comparison that takes the West as benchmark remains in some scholarship in the present day. Furthermore, such a presumption is antithetical to any understanding of a "politics of location" (Rich 1986) that is attentive to the particular contexts in which sexual subjectivities are embedded, as well as the various forces (such as globalization, neoliberalism, and coloniality) that act upon and through them. I argue that attending to a politics of location allows for an understanding of the historical,

institutional, and social contexts that (dis)enable certain kinds of sexual subjects, which I will further discuss in this chapter.

I begin with a discussion of the ways in which sexuality is reflexively narrated in forms of corporeal experience and discursive existence. This discussion will be followed by an extensive analysis of the ways in which my participants negotiate 1) sex and sense-making processes; 2) phallocentric (hetero)sexual norms within romantic and sexual relationships; 3) masturbation; and 4) one's own body. I argue that such processes of continuous negotiation involve an imagination of futurity that is contingent on the direction toward which the subject (re)orientates. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the changing, fluid, and complex processes of *becoming* that I seek to theorize through narratives of corporeal, affective, discursive, and imaginative negotiation.

Sexuality: Where to from shame?

The formal term for sexual intercourse in Vietnamese is "*quan hệ tình dục*", which is used in political, legal, and educational contexts. My participants often used the abbreviated term "*quan hệ*", or "having sex" in English, when talking about personal experience of sex. Another way in which they discussed sex was to refer to it as an act of "*làm*" [to do/make] – as a part of the term "*làm tình*" [to make love] – which was mostly used by Vân Du when she talked about her sexual relationship with her boyfriend. This use of an abbreviation to refer to the act of having sex was not an exception: many other sex related notions were referred to either in an abbreviated form, in English, or were not mentioned at all, the meaning of which will be further discussed in the section on masturbation.

For Tú, sex should only happen within the context of marriage. She told me that her mother usually says: "*nếu một thằng đàn ông nếu mà nó thương mình nó có thể chờ mình*" [if a man really loves for you, he will be able to wait], an idea that Tú herself accepted. While Tú had a long-term relationship in her early twenties, she told me she never had sex with her

boyfriend as she did not believe that she would one day marry that person. It was not clear from the interview whether there were any implications for not having sex with her boyfriend at the time. Yet this belief, I argue, is commonly upheld in Vietnam. For instance, Vân Du also mentioned this idea and suggested that it is now being practiced differently:

> *Tại vì VN bây giờ bắt đầu accept cái việc... have sex trước marriage rồi, nhưng mà đa số họ dùng cái đó as a form of trust. Và chỉ have sex trước marriage khi... really sure là cả hai người sẽ cưới thôi. […] Cho nên mình nghĩ là những cái người mà nghĩ như vậy á, thì họ cũng sẽ bị hold back vô cái relationship đó. Họ vẫn sẽ đi đến cái việc là kết hôn, cho dù là không có hạnh phúc đi chăng nữa.*
>
> Vietnam is now starting to accept the… sex before marriage [idea]. But for most people it serves as a form of trust. [Meaning that] they only have premarital sex when… they're sure that they will get married. […] So I think the people who have this kind of thought are also tied to the relationship. They will still get married even if they're not happy [with the relationship].

Despite different approaches to the topic, scholarship on sexual practices among youth, as well as the media, has increased over the past few decades and has discussed the growing practices of premarital sex in urban spaces of Vietnam (e.g., Bélanger and Khuat 1999; M. Do and Fu 2010; P.A. Nguyen 2007; Thu 2013). This literature demonstrates that attitudes toward premarital sex vary as there is no consensus on which such a practice is socially permitted.

Vân Du, while pointing toward such a pattern of change, posits her own interpretation of changing perceptions on premarital sex. She was vividly troubled when speaking about such change as she related it to her personal situation. Similar to Tú, Vân Du explained that she used to subscribe to the idea that she would not engage in sexual intercourse prior to marriage. She is now living overseas with her long-term boyfriend, Danny, as she is pursuing a Master's

degree.[39] The process of moving together in was extremely stressful for Vân Du as both her and her boyfriend had to ask for permission from their families. They were only permitted to live together if they got engaged, which was expected to lead to a marriage. Despite that, living together as an unmarried couple is still considered a shameful matter in Vietnam, so none of their relatives knew about this arrangement.

Vân Du explained that she used to feel very guilty for thinking about having sex and after she first had sex with her current long-term boyfriend, reflecting an affective experience of shame such that I discussed in Chapter 4. When she decided to have sex with him they had lived together for several months, with the acceptance of both families and with the expectation that they would get married in the near future:

> *Lúc đầu lúc mà mình chưa có ấy thì mình cảm thấy guilty. Mình cảm thấy là nếu mà mình làm là mình fail cái trust của mẹ mình, tại vì mẹ mình đã trust mình cho mình qua đây học rồi. […] Tại vì lúc mà [...] mẹ mình đòi ly dị cái ba cứ chỉ vô mặt mình nói là: ly dị đi rồi mai mốt nó theo trai rồi xấu hổ cả nhà. (Ngưng). Cho nên mẹ mình... không có muốn cái lời ba mình nói thành sự thật á.*
>
> In the beginning when I didn't *do that* I felt guilty.[40] I felt like if I do it I would breach the trust that my mom had, because my mom trusted me and let me come here to study. […] Because when […] my mom asked my father to have a divorce and he kept pointing to my face and said: if [we] divorce she's going to follow a boy one day and embarrass the whole family. [Pause]. So my mom… didn't want what my father said to become true.

To "*theo trai*" [follow a boy] is a phrase commonly used to describe married women who are considered unworthy and immoral when they leave their husband for another man.[41] The phrase can also be used as a derogative notion for unmarried women who engage in relationships that

[39] I assign the pseudonym Danny for Vân Du's partner for the purposes of anonymity. Vân Du used his real name in the interviews; Danny is a Vietnamese person who has been living overseas for the past decade and goes by an English name instead of his Vietnamese name.
[40] I italicize the phrase "do that" to emphasize that this was used by Vân Du to refer to the act of having sex.
[41] "*Theo trai*" is part of the term "*bỏ nhà theo trai*" [leave the house to follow a boy].

are not approved by the family. Vân Du's father mobilized the term to say that without his guardianship, she would engage in *unapproved* relationships and, thus, bring shame on the family. On the one hand, this was a rhetorical devise used to prove his authoritative status as the head of a patriarchal household (Atsufumi 2016a; Werner 2009). On the other hand, this could be understood as an insult for Vân Du as such a saying discursively constructs her as a shameful (sexual) subject.

Vân Du asserted that now, she no longer felt the shame that she used to experience. Rather, she felt that she could not leave this relationship even if she would like to:

> *Mình sợ một chuyện là nếu mà... mình chia tay với Danny đi, mà mình với Danny đang ở chung rồi, là mẹ mình tự hiểu là mình với Danny có làm rồi, thì mẹ mình sẽ cảm thấy... mẹ mình sẽ không chấp nhận được chuyện đó. [...] Mình bị stuck ở chỗ là... bây giờ mà nếu mình ko có work it out together mà mình chia tay á, thì... thì... không được.*
>
> I am afraid that if… in case I break up with Danny, but me and Danny are living together, so my mom would automatically assume that we have done it, and so my mom would feel… she would not accept it. […] I'm stuck at the point where… if I don't work out this relationship and break up, it… it cannot be.

The potential consequences of breaking up at this stage has become a major source of anxiety that is reinforced by Vân Du's affective experience of shame. Sex had been imagined as an intimate part of a potential marriage life and, therefore, had become a knot that ties Vân Du to this relationship. As she decided to have sex, she also decided to act upon her sexual desire. In that sense, I argue that there has been a change of course in Vân Du's relationship to sex and her own sexual desire toward a sense of acceptance (in the condition that it leads to marriage). In that sense, I would refrain from thinking of such a form of acceptance in a liberal discourse on development that associates such a change with a linear progress (see also Choudhury 2009). Indeed, such an assumption has been reflected in some of the English language scholarship on gender, sexuality, and sexual practices of societies and cultures in the Global South, as I

discussed in the beginning of this chapter (Connell 2014). In this literature, women are characterized as *oppressed*, shackled by *tradition*, and in need of liberation.[42] Rather, I argue that this process of change should be understood as a mode of *becoming*, which will be further demonstrated in the following section. To think of this process as *becoming* is not only to reject the liberal feminist discourse, but also to take seriously the project of multifaceted and multidimensional changes over time as the sexual subject is formed, reformed, and transformed.

Sexual happenings

I use the term "sexual happenings" to refer to experiences of sex, including various sexual practices and ways of negotiating sex and its pervasive phallocentric (hetero)sexual norms, one's own sexual desires and body. In listening, constructing, and reiterating such narratives, in this section, I seek to map out *moments* of affective experience of the sexual subject. Drawing on Massumi's (1996, 397) use of "moments", I use the term "happenings" to denote the constant change of orientation in the occurrence of such experiences, reflecting what will be later discussed as *becoming*.

Sex and (structurally conditioned) sense-making

In this section, I focus on Linh's narratives of negotiating sex, sexuality, and gender to situate her *becoming* in the sociocultural context Vietnam. Linh told me she had been actively looking for a "sugar daddy" as soon as she finished high school as she idealized the female figure she had seen in manga when growing up. Clarifying what she meant by such a figure, Linh said:

[42] Mahmood (2001), for instance, argues against such a register by demonstrating the "docile" agency of women who participated in the Islamic Revival Movement in Egypt.

> *Nếu như mà em có một người mà... em yêu thích thì em sẽ [...]hạ mình xuống một cái vị trí rất là submissive, tại em... thích cái sự submissive đó. […] em cần cái sự... dominance từ phía nam... để em cảm thấy là bản thân em nó... worthy và valuable.*
>
> If I have a person that… I really like, then I would […] lower myself to a position that is very submissive, because I… like such submissiveness. […] I need the… dominance from the man's side… to feel that I am… worthy and valuable.

She then met a "sugar daddy" from Singapore (who I will call Ho) and moved there to do her Bachelor's degree, as well as to be with him. As Linh described, it was the (sexual) dominance that drew her into the practice of Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, and Sadism and Masochism (BDSM) roleplaying, which Linh initiated in her relationship with Ho. She told me she took the position of a "slave" and Ho played the "master" – a form of dominance/submissive and sadomasochism relationship.

Sadomasochism has been historically characterized as a pathology in the realm of medicine and its associated natural sciences since Krafft-Ebing (1939) first coined the term to describe the phenomenon of giving and receiving psychological and physical pain for sexual pleasure. [43] More recent English scholarship, for instance, has pointed to the way in which it is practiced as a form of negotiation with past trauma; survivors of (sexual) trauma engage in various forms of BDSM to re-enact and rework their trauma (Cascalheira et al. 2021; Hammers 2019; Thomas 2020). In raising the issue of past trauma, I am by no means making a generalization about all practitioners of BDSM, nor am I implying that this was necessarily the case with Linh. Rather, I suggest that the dominance Linh was drawn to could *possibly* be

[43] There is no Vietnamese term for the practice of BDSM: it is often referred to in English, and most understandings of BDSM that circulate in Vietnam are also derived from the body of literature and popular understandings of such erotic practices in English and the Global North. I wish to refrain from any generalization on the popular view on BDSM in Vietnam as there is little literature written on this topic thus far. However, the history of pathologizing paraphilia in English language scholarship, I suggest, does travel and leave traces in the up-take and usage of the term BDSM in Vietnam. See, for instance, an online Vietnamese article titled "Bên Trong Những Hội Nhóm Giao Lưu Tình Dục BDSM: Tự Do Khoái Cảm Hay Sự Quái Đản? [Inside the BDSM Sex Clubs: Sexual Freedom or Eccentricity?]" 2020) that describes BDSM practices as dangerous and "vượt ra ngoài phạm vi văn hóa truyền thống" [outside of the parameter of cultural tradition] (para. 12).

understood in relation to her past (abusive) relationship with her parents, who used to beat her as a way of discipling her. At the same time, beating a child is not an uncommon form of disciplining in the Vietnamese culture. "*Thương cho roi cho vọt, ghét cho ngọt cho bùi*", which is equivalent to the English proverb "spare the rod, spoil the child", is a Vietnamese proverb that is often invoked to justify the act of disciplining using physical violence.

Linh's relationship with Ho, as she described, was consensual in the beginning, but it soon "*trở thành một cái sự... abusive dominance, chứ nó không phải là kiểu như sexual dominance nữa*" [became an… abusive dominance, not a kind of sexual dominance anymore]. Certain acts of domination that Linh consented to quickly escalated to a level that she no longer felt comfortable with. Linh broke the relationship off after a year but continued to long for such forms of dominance and submissiveness. She then decided to work as an escort but stopped after three months when she met her current boyfriend, who wished to have a monogamous relationship. Linh expressed that she was not as sexually satisfied with her current boyfriend as with previous partners; however, she felt contend with the relationship as it offered a more "*cuộc sống bình thường*" [normal life], which included having a (romantic) relationship with someone of a similar age. In explaining her choice, Linh juxtaposed her current relationship with the previous experiences of having a "sugar daddy" and being an escort and claimed that those were times that she did not have "self-value".[44] She explained that in her pursuit of a dominance/submissive relationship, she had eventually given up on her own social network, better schooling opportunities, and, therefore, a better career. This explanation, while not speaking directly to the intricate relationship between morality and sexuality, needs to be located within the broader condemnation of sex work in contemporary Vietnam (Nguyễn-võ 2012). One of the state-propagated discourses associated with sex work, Nguyễn-võ (2012) argues, is that it is not honest, respectable, or legitimate work. I suggest that this discourse on

[44] Linh used the English word "self-value" in her narrative.

sex work affected the way in which Linh made sense of her experience as not "normal"; this was evident in way Linh had to hide her experiences of being an escort and having a "sugar daddy" from her parents. Navigating sex and relationship, as I demonstrated in this section, is a domain through which the sexual subject-in-becoming is forced to negotiate the institutions that (dis)enable certain gendered modes of behaving.

I have thus far demonstrated the way in which one's choice of partner and type of relationship are negotiated within the broader structure of power-knowledge, where meanings of sex, sexuality, and gender are regulated. In what follows, I map out the way in which my participants negotiated specific sexual norms within their sexual relationships.

Negotiating phallocentric (hetero)sexual norms

A number of my participants spoke about a similar pattern of sex acts with their partners in which they perceived their partner's sexual satisfaction as more important than their own, which I view as part of *phallocentric (hetero)sexual norms*. In particular, sex is often assumed to have concluded when their male partner ejaculates. While acknowledging the gap of sexual pleasure, my participants attributed different meanings to such a phenomenon, most of which maintained that female orgasm during sex was not a priority. Linh, for instance, explained that she had never experienced orgasm during intercourse:

> *Chỉ có foreplay thì em lên đỉnh được. Nhưng mà không phải tất cả mọi người đều kiên nhẫn để làm foreplay tới lúc em lên đỉnh. […] Tới bạn trai bây giờ của em thì hầu hết mọi lần chỉ là giải quyết cho bạn đó thôi.*
>
> I only have an orgasm during foreplay. But not everyone has the patience to do foreplay until I have an orgasm. […] Almost every time [I have sex] with my boyfriend now is to satisfy him.

The use of the term "foreplay" itself speaks to a phallocentric sexual norm that is adhered to in Linh's experience of sex. Sexual *fore*play, as a form of non-coitus sex, both semantically and

practically functions in the peripheral space of a sex act. When I asked Linh how she felt about not achieving orgasm during sex, she explained that she found more pleasure in satisfying her partner. This, Linh asserted, gave her a sense that "*em đã chinh phục được người đó*" [I have conquered this person]. She further explained that it was not the fact that her partner is sexually satisfied that pleases her, but that she saw it as a form of validation: "*người đó validate em rất là sexy, em rất là... giỏi trong chuyện giường chiếu*" [that person validates that I am very sexy [and] I am really… good in bed]; hence, it was a form of self-validation that Linh was after.

This sentiment was similarly shared by Vân Du, who said that she feels a "sense of achievement" when her partner, Danny, ejaculates after he receives oral sex or stimulation by hand, which is usually the only way in which he can ejaculate. He usually asks Vân Du to perform the labor of giving him oral sex or manual stimulation, a process which Vân Du told me that she does not enjoy. In this case, Vân Du's sense of achievement can be understood as an internalized perception of phallocentric (hetero)sexual norms that emphasize penile-vaginal penetration, male ejaculation and perpetuate this as the main goal of a sexual encounter. I argue that the way in which this process is highly gendered also forms part of the normalization of male ejaculation, regardless of the means through which that is achieved, and the marginalization of women's pleasure.

Vân Du's sense of achievement in making Danny ejaculates also translated to her sense of self-abasement when Danny does not have orgasm during sex:

> *Mình lại feel bad ở chỗ là… làm với mình không đủ stimulation bằng cái việc làm tay hay làm miệng. (Ngưng). Cái mình sẽ belittle bản thân. Mình quay lại mình nói là mình không có đủ capability để làm cho Danny cum, toàn là phải làm tay.*
>
> I feel bad that… having sex with me is not as stimulating as doing it by hand or mouth. (Pause). Then I would belittle myself. I would think that I don't have enough capability to make Danny cum, [I always] have to do it by hand.

This form of self-abasement, however, does not happen in a vacuum. I argue that Danny's interaction with Vân Du outside of sex perpetuates the sexual script that centers on male orgasm-orientated coitus sex and induces further anxiety and guilt on the part of Vân Du. In particular, oral sex or hand stimulation do not usually last longer enough for Danny to ejaculate so he would masturbate after Vân Du gets tired. She told me that Danny sometimes *jokingly* tells her that "*em đâu có tự làm cho anh ra được đâu*" [you couldn't make me cum by yourself], for which she felt bad. As Vân Du explained, "*Mặc dù là Danny không có mean to say it in that way, ý là kiểu chỉ joking thôi nhưng mà mình kiểu, ờ... yeah... it kinda... uncomfortable.*" [Although Danny does not mean it in such a way, like it was just a joke but I am like… yeah… it's kinda… uncomfortable]. In asserting that she felt uncomfortable, it is evident that Vân Du to a certain extent has internalized the phallocentric (hetero)sexual norm of not being able to fulfill her partner, and according to such, a sense of shame was induced.

Masturbation: A mode of negotiation

"*Thủ dâm*", which can be understood literally as using one's hands to satisfy one's own sexual desire, is the formal Vietnamese term for masturbation. None of my participants, however, used the word "*thủ dâm*" when talking about masturbation. They either responded to my question on whether they have masturbated before without using the term itself or used the word "masturbation" in English.[45] The act of avoiding using the Vietnamese term itself implies a level of shame associated with the act of masturbating, the corporeal and affective dimensions of which have been discussed in the previous chapter. Here, I would like to emphasize the *discursive* aspect of shame in relations to language use, in relation to acts of self-pleasure.

Vân Du spoke to me about her experience of masturbation both as a form of self-pleasure and, eventually, as a coping mechanism to sustain her within her current relationship:

[45] When I posed these questions, I uses the term "*thủ dâm*" in Vietnamese in the first instance, after which I switched to "masturbation" in English as my participants avoided using the Vietnamese term or abstractly referenced the act.

> *Lúc trước mặc dù mình không có associate việc relationship với sex, nhưng mà mình vẫn có masturbate. Nhưng mà mình không có…không phải là proper way á - ý là chỉ cọ xát chỗ đó thôi.*
>
> I told you I didn't associate sex with romantic relationships, but I still masturbated. But I didn't… it wasn't proper masturbation – I mean, I was just rubbing that part against [something].

Masturbation, while discursively censored, seems to be a relatively acceptable form of sexual activity for Vân Du. The notion of "proper masturbation" is particularly important here as it points to an imagined normative form of masturbation where, as Vân Du alluded, involves specific ways of touching the clitoris and/or penetrating the vagina. Vân Du then told me: "*Khi mà mình start cái relationship với Danny rồi á, mà mình không có satisfy được cái need của mình... thường mình sẽ masturbate lúc mà... Danny không có ở nhà.*" [After I started seeing Danny, and couldn't satisfy my own sexual needs… I usually masturbate when… Danny isn't home]. Masturbation here has become a mechanism for Vân Du to manage her own sexual satisfaction.

When I asked if Danny knew that she masturbates in her own time, she told me that she never really tells him. While Vân Du did not speak about why she wanted to hide this from Danny, I suggest that this might have been an effort to not disrupt his discursive articulation of masculinity that is tied to sexual performance and the ability to satisfy one's partner. This was also an effort to save Danny's "face"; "*giữ thể diện*" [saving one's face] is a social behavior in Vietnam and other Confucian heritage societies. In these contexts, shame can be induced and experienced collectively not only as a result of an individual's wrongful act, but also due to perceived shortcomings and failures (T.Q.T. Nguyen and Simkin 2015). In this sense, revealing to Danny her motivation and experience of masturbation might induce shame for Vân Du, and thus has the potential to disrupt their romantic relationship and everyday lives. As such, the act of engaging in masturbation as a phallocentric (hetero)sexual norm requires some negotiation

with the cultural expectations and social norms of Vietnamese society. Building upon my discussion of agency in Chapter 3, I argue that the way in which Vân Du experienced and made sense of masturbation demonstrated a level of agency that is exercised carefully and tactically in an attempt to negotiate sex and romantic relationship.

Relationship with one's body

Sexual subjectivities are not limited to the experience of having sex and the meanings associated with that practice, but also the way in which the body is molded and incorporated into such experiences (Bao 2018). Several of my participants reflected on the way in which they related to and worked on their bodies over time.

Xuân told me that when she was seeing her second boyfriend in her early 20s, she did not like her body. After their relationship ended, Xuân lost about 11 kilograms, which she believed to be a positive change. Xuân believed that it was her body change that attracted her most recent boyfriend with whom she had been friends for years. Anh Thuỳ, in a slightly different manner to Xuân, explained that she had not liked her body when she was younger. She told me she did not like that she had thick lower legs, a feature that Thuỳ had always been conscious about as a blemish of her body. Since she picked up pole dancing in 2019, she learnt to see her body in a different light:

> *Từ hồi tập… múa cột thì mình thấy nó […] nó làm cho mình thích những cái đó giờ mình nghĩ là khuyết điểm trên cơ thể mình hơn. […] Cái chuyện mà múa nói chung, thì ra đúng cái động tác với lại đi đúng những cái motion thì, với lại quen tới một cái mức nào đó, thì nó sẽ đẹp. Thì lúc đó mình nhìn là, ai cũng đẹp được hết, không có cần phải tự ti nữa.*
>
> Since I started… to learn pole dancing I think it… made me grow fond of the body parts that I used to see as blemishes. […] Dancing in general, if you do the movements and the motions correctly, and if you are used to it to a certain extent, it would look good. So then I realised that anyone can look beautiful, I don't need to feel inferior.

Pole dancing here was seen as a means through which Thuỳ could engage with her body differently. Such an engagement, I argue, fostered a change in Thuỳ's relationship with her own body. It was not clear why Thuỳ picked up pole dancing specifically. However, she explained that she gave up playing sports like badminton as she believed that they made her look more muscular. While she did not give much attention to this before, Thuỳ explained that she had wanted to look more *feminine*.

Drawing on K.K. Hoang's (2014) notion of "technologies of embodiment", I suggest that Xuân and Anh Thuỳ manipulated their bodies in different ways to embody specific forms of femininity. Technologies of embodiment refer to the process through which women employ specific kinds of "body work" (Gimlin, 2007, cited in K.K. Hoang 2014, 516) to transform their bodies or "embodied performance[s] of femininity" (K.K. Hoang 2014, 517). It is important to note that at any given time and space, beauty ideals do not exist in a vacuum. Saraswati (2013), for instance, demonstrates the transnational circulation and construction of beauty standards in which light-skin became a desirable feature in contemporary Indonesia, which has also been the case in other Southeast Asian countries including Vietnam. The desirable whiteness, as Saraswati (2013) argues, does not only resemble the Caucasian race, but has been affectively constructed in ways that bring with it the idea of cosmopolitanism, thus associating white skin with positive feelings. Drawing on K.K. Hoang's (2014) discussion of technologies of embodiment, I argue that the beauty ideals my participants adhered to and the femininity they reworked their body to perform should be seen as mechanisms of *becoming*. In redrafting their bodies, my participants sought to affectively transform their experiences as sexual subjects.

Imagining becoming

In this section, I focus on the way in which some of my participants imagined their *becoming* in narrating their sexual subjectivities. Becoming, I argue, involves a casting of the subject into the imagined futurity in ways that the subject constantly (re)orientates toward.

When I asked Diệu Anh if she planned to get married, she told me that she does not know: "*nhưng mà Diệu Anh mong muốn là nếu mà Diệu Anh kết hôn thì mối quan hệ này sẽ tốt hơn, thì Diệu Anh sẽ có đường về Việt Nam (cười)*" [but I hope that if I get married, this relationship would get better, so I can come back to Vietnam (laugh)]. Diệu Anh explained that if she comes back to Vietnam, "*Diệu Anh sẽ bị quản thúc như là thời cấp 3 vậy… là bố mẹ Diệu Anh sẽ không cho Diệu Anh chuyển ra ngoài […]. Nên Diệu Anh phải kết hôn rồi Diệu Anh mới dám về (cười).*" [I will be controlled like when I was in high school… and my parents wouldn't let me move out […] So I'll have to get married first to come back (smiles)]. Getting married, in this sense, was imagined as a form of negotiation with familial norms.

In Vietnam, it is a common practice for young married couple to live with their parents. In cosmopolitan spaces such as urban HCMC, however, it has become a more of a common practice for newlywed couples to have their own living space; yet to move out prior to marriage remains a frowned-upon practice. Not only can the practice of living with multiple generations in one household be interpreted as an inheritance of Confucian ideology (McHale 2002; Werner 2009), living alone – or moving out prior to marriage – is seen as an individualistic, hence immoral, and in some cases, Western act. Atsufumi (2016a), for instance, discusses this idea in the context of the semantic use of "*công*" and "*tư*" in the Vietnamese language, which can be roughly understood as "public" and "private" respectively, the symbolic meaning of which is derived from Confucianism. Public matters are not only thought of as the masculine realm, but also occupy a positive and more *legitimate* position than private tasks.[46] In that sense, to

[46] Refer to Atsufumi (2016a) for a more in-depth discussion of the way in which "*công*" is semiotically understood as matters that are heavenly mandated. This idea can be traced back to Confucian ideology where the imperial

live alone (as an unmarried woman) is considered eccentric, individualistic behavior, and rarely approved of (by parents) in Vietnam.

Getting married, I argue, was also imagined as a way through which Diệu Anh could be accepted as a sexual subject by her parents. Diệu Anh explained that her mother has been shaming her for engaging in sexual activities since she found out that Diệu Anh used contraception. She was called "*đĩ*" [a slut] and branded a "*hư hỏng*" [bad thing] by her parents.[47] There was a sense of anger, frustration, and sadness as Diệu Anh told me this. She found it unfair that despite her academic achievements, career, and successful life overseas, she was branded an immoral person and thus a failure in her parents' eyes as they could not accept her sexuality. Despite mentioning the possibility of getting married and being in a relationship, Diệu Anh did not have any plans for marriage in the near future when she spoke to me. Marriage does not seem to be a practical solution that Diệu Anh wants to resort to, but rather a virtual option for an imaginative *becoming*. Drawing on Saraswati's (2013) use of "virtuality", I use the term virtual here to signify the state in between reality and the unreal in two senses: the virtuality is not only an option that can(not) be opted for, but also occupies a space that hosts a projection of the subject in specific ways.

Such imagining, I argue, is essential for the subject-in-becoming. Imagining futurity involves a certain degree of (re)orientation in which the subject turns. In the case of Diệu Anh, this imagining includes an affective negotiation with the past and present as she sought to repudiate the shaming she received from her parents.

court, ruled by the king – who is understood as "*thiên tử*" [the son of heaven] – was believed to have a mandate from heaven. In that sense, the public is understood as "the embodiment of heavenly principles", occupying a more legitimate position in comparison to the private.

[47] See L.A.T. Do et al. (2017) for a discussion of the discursive use of the term "*hư hỏng*" among parents in Vietnam.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed processes of change in my participants' narratives by focusing on their nuanced experiences of negotiating sex, sexuality, and gender. I have illuminated the ways in which my participants navigated sexuality on a corporeal and discursive level. This chapter has also detailed various accounts of *sexual happenings*, in which different sexual practices were experienced and made sense of through negotiating political and sociocultural ideologies on respectable sexual conduct, as well as phallocentric (hetero)sexual norms that centralize and prioritize coital sex and male pleasure. In that sense, masturbation was discussed by some of my participants as a means of negotiating such sexual norms, recentering self-pleasure, and navigating their (sexual) relationships. Part of these processes of change involved a (re)working of the body, through which my participants sought to embody a specific form of femininity and, in turn, transform their experiences as sexual subjects. While these different domains of sexual experiences have been discussed as separate analytical categories for the purpose of clarity, they are nevertheless intricately interwoven. Reading narratives for such intertextuality, I argue, allows for an understanding of a contextually contingent form of agency, as exhibited through acts of masturbation.

I have, therefore, demonstrated through different domains the mode of becoming through which sexual subjectivities are experienced and reiterated in my participants' narratives. Becoming, therefore, involves a process of negotiation with the corporeal, affective, and discursive dimensions of sex and one's own sexuality. Part of such processes, I argue, is the casting of the subject into the imagined futurity toward which the subject (re)orientates.

Chapter 6: Final remarks

> The potential of Asia as method is this: using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other's points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt.
>
> (Chen 2010, 212)

In his book, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*, Chen advocates a shift in paradigms of knowledge production: that is, to rely on the historical experiences and practices in Asian contexts for alternative perspectives and theorizations. Chen suggests that a mutual learning, on both a theoretical and a practical level, between Asian countries, societies, and intellectual projects is necessary for both regional solidarity and transformation. The project of shifting points of reference away from Europe and North America, Chen argues, is indebted to generations of previous thinkers such as Fanon (1967 [1952], 1968 [1961]), Memmi (1991 [1957]), and Nandy (1983). Grounded in a feminist epistemology with a commitment to the "politics of location" (Rich 1986), my thesis has examined sexual subjectivities of young, unmarried women from HCMC within the postcolonial, postsocialist, and neoliberal context of Vietnam. In doing so, I contribute to the theorization of gender and sexual politics in Asia in ways that foreground Asia as a benchmark, which can be seen as a response to Chen's (2010) advocacy for "Asia as method" and Connell's (2014) call for more theorization from the Global South.

In this thesis, I have explored the processes of sexual subject formation, reformation, and transformation of young Vietnamese women through a feminist narrative approach. Multiple narrative interviews were conducted with nine self-identified women from HCMC, aged 23-30 years old. My participants were mostly from middle-class families and had access to education and opportunities for upward mobility. Their socioeconomic background also gave them access to materials, spaces, and networks, and shaped their (sexual) subjectivities in

distinctive ways. The experiences that are examined in this thesis are not directly applicable to Vietnamese women from other classes and locations; however, drawing upon my participants' narratives, my argument for an understanding of sexual subjectivities as processes of *becoming* through which one continuously negotiates institutions of power-knowledge that (dis)enable certain practices and experiences, can be deployed for future studies on (sexual) subjectivities of other participants in other contexts.

Further to this argument, my three analytical chapters are structured and presented in the form of narratives of becoming. The first chapter mapped out the various processes of sexual subject formation, which I argue included a number of key dimensions: 1) negotiation with one's family, through which social norms and collective history are implicated; 2) the diverse materials through which one learns about sex and romantic relationships; 3) the experience of having affection and/or sexual attraction to someone; and 4) one's first sexual encounter. I emphasized the diverse experiences of (sexual) subject formation which are deeply implicated in the historical, temporal, and spatial context of contemporary Vietnam. I argue that the processes of finding and accessing information on gender, sex, and sexuality, experiencing romantic and/or sexual forms of attraction, and having sexual encounters, were negotiated under the discursive demoralization of premarital sex and silencing of information around sexuality. Amid these challenges, my participants came to learn about sex and relationships through various cultural products, such as (educational) texts, graphic novels, and pornography. Such experiences were deeply intertwined with their gender and class position. Therefore, I argued for a more nuanced reading of agency in my participants' narratives that pays attention to the context and structure through which agency was exercised.

My second analytical chapter focused on narratives of violence, as I discussed the ways in which quotidian forms of violence such as structural surveillance and censorship, the affective experience of shame, as well as incidents of sexual violence such as harassment and

rape, are experienced and negotiated. I argued that the quotidian violence of censorship and condemnation were systematically produced and strengthened within the infrastructure of state politics, education, medical assess, mass media, family, and community. I demonstrated several tactics of negotiating surveillance and censorship, the discursive condemnation of young women's sexuality, as well as incidents of assault. In negotiating experiences of harassment, assault, and rape, my participants narrated a logic of self-blame, which was located within ideas of family honor, respectability, and gender norms. These narratives occasionally occluded the nexus of structural sexism, racism, and classism that work to facilitate certain forms of sexual violence. The various forms of violence discussed in this chapter should be understood as parts of a continuum of violence that overlaps in its exercise of power yet affects the subjects in specific ways. In demonstrating the various ways of negotiating violence, I argued for an understanding of violence in its material and affective forms as forces of disruption, and the process of negotiation with violence as a form of orientation, through which the subject is constantly (re)orientated.

My last analytical chapter focused on my participants' ongoing negotiation with experiences of gender, sex, and sexuality. I coined the term *sexual subjects-in-becoming* to refer to the fluid, continuous, and changing nature of such processes of becoming. I have done so by detailing various accounts of *sexual happenings* in which sex was experienced and made sense of through negotiating political and sociocultural ideologies on respectable sexual conduct, as well as *phallocentric (hetero)sexual norms*. Such *norms* have regulated my participants' sexual subjectivities, yet also created space for subtle maneuvers and negotiation through, for instance, performing masturbation. In accounting for the different domains through which sexual subjectivities are structured, (dis)enabled, and experienced, I argued that *becoming* involves a continuous process of negotiation with the corporeal, affective, and

discursive dimensions of sex and one's own sexuality, as well as an affective imagination of futurity.

Informed by a postcolonial queer feminist approach, my thesis built upon Bao's (2018) study of politicized queer subjects in China and offered a new way to theorize sexual subjectivities of young, unmarried, middle-class Vietnamese women. Understanding sexual subjectivities as processes of *becoming*, I argue, is relevant for future studies on sex, sexuality, and gender beyond the immediate context of Vietnam. Beside advancing a new perspective on theorizing sexual subjectivities, this thesis also contributes to the topical literature on sex, sexuality, and gender in Vietnam by exploring the structural forces such as (post)coloniality, postsocialism, and neoliberalism. In doing so, I emphasized the intersections of gender, class, and race in my participants' negotiations with their own sexuality, sexual practices, and experiences of violence.

My thesis also sought to advance "Asia as method" (Chen 2010), and respond to Connell's (2014) call for more theorization from the Global South in four ways. Firstly, regionally and politically relevant scholarship was used as the contextual and theoretical framework for this study. Secondly, I recontextualized Anglo-European theories and concepts, when possible, in ways that are application to the location of my participants. Thirdly, I developed a new perspective on theorizing sexual subjectivities that can be further deployed beyond the context of Vietnam. Finally, I contributed to the development of a feminist narrative approach to researching sexuality in Asian contexts. I discussed various tactics of care and strategies of listening in conducting research on sensitive and difficult topics, which can be further employed in future studies on sex, sexuality, and gender in Vietnam in particular, and other Asian contexts more broadly.

Appendix A: Main topics and prompting questions

This document and the followings (see Appendix B and C) were originally written in Vietnamese. English translations were made solely for the purposes of inclusion in this thesis.

CEU CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

MAIN TOPICS AND PROMPTING QUESTIONS

1) **Childhood and teenage years**
   a. What are the roles of studying and having romantic relationships in your life when you were growing up?
   b. What did you learn in terms of sex education, human biology and/or human sexuality?
   c. How did you go through your puberty? What experiences and reactions did you have when your body changed?
2) **Experiences on romantic relationships**
   a. How was your first love and your subsequent relationships?
   b. How have your romantic relationship(s) and you in your relationship(s) changed over time?
   c. What were/are the roles of your romantic relationship(s) in your life?
   d. What and how have your partner(s) affected your thoughts and experiences of life and relationships?
3) **Sexual experiences (if any)**
   a. What were/are your sexual experiences (in your relationships)?
   b. What are your thoughts on sex (from sex education, conversations with friends, family, popular culture, or social media)?
   c. How was your first sexual experience (if applicable)?
   d. How were/are your recent/current sexual experience(s)?
4) **Body and sexuality**
   a. How have you experienced your body and its changes since you were a child until now?
   b. What were/are your thoughts and experiences with sexual pleasure?
   c. Whom and what events have influenced and affected your thoughts on sex in general and your sexual experiences?
   d. Have you had any experiences with women?
5) **Family, friends, colleagues, and society**
   a. How do you think your family, friends, colleagues, etc., would react to your romantics (and sexual) experiences?
   b. What were your experiences with social norms and expectations on sex when you were in school and in adulthood?
   c. How do you think people around you have influenced you? Have this affected your thoughts and experiences in romantic (and sexual) relationships?

Appendix B: Invitation letter and participant information sheet

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INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Project Title: *Subjects-in-becoming: Theorizing sexual subjectivities of young, unmarried women from Hồ Chí Minh City, Vietnam*

Researcher:

Ms Nguyễn Thị Thanh Nhã, Department of Gender Studies, Central European University, nguyen_nha@student.ceu.edu

Supervisor:

Dr Hannah Loney, Department of Gender Studies, Central European University, loneyh@ceu.edu

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a research project for an MA thesis submitted to the Department of Gender Studies, Central European University (CEU); this research will be conducted by interviewing young, unmarried Vietnamese women from Hồ Chí Minh City. Please read this sheet carefully and be confident that you understand its contents before deciding whether to participate. If you have any questions about the project, please contact the Researcher.

Who is involved in this research project? Why is it being conducted?

Ms Nguyễn Thị Thanh Nhã, who is a graduate student at the Department of Gender Studies, CEU, is conducting this research project for her Master's dissertation and (potentially) associated manuscripts for publication in English-speaking academic journals.

What is the project about? What are the questions being addressed?

The purpose of this study is to understand the way in which young women negotiate with the changing political, economic, sociocultural context of urban Vietnam in their everyday lives and romantic relationships, focusing particularly on sexuality.

If I agree to participate, what will I be required to do?

You will be asked to participate in a narrative interview via a video-call or audio-call on the platform Zoom. The interview will take approximately one to two hours of your time. Before the narrative interview can be scheduled, you will be asked to read and sign a consent form (which can be found at the end of this document).

During the interview you will be asked to narrate your experiences regarding sexuality. This can include, but is not limited to, your experiences of going through puberty, feeling attracted to someone, developing (sexual) desires, and engaging in romantic relationships/courtship. The researcher is interested in your thoughts and experiences of navigating your own sexuality.

Before the interview begins, the researcher will ask for your permission to record the interview for the purpose of transcribing and analysis. You will be under no pressure or duress to give permission for a recording device to be used. A summary of the interview content and the associated audio recording will be sent to you after the interview has been conducted. You may review, edit or provide further clarification (which can be discussed between you and

the researcher) to the information you have provided in the interview either via email or a follow-up conversation with the researcher.

What are the possible risks or disadvantages?

The interview will be based on your personal experiences of (hetero)sexuality and romantic relationships; as such, you will be asked to divulge information concerning your personal life. To mitigate and potential risks, all information will be strictly confidential. You have the right to withdraw from the project at any time without consequences, and without giving a reason.

The researcher will work with you to determine a time to conduct the interview that is convenient for you. This is to ensure that no unreasonable demands will be placed on your time.

What are the benefits associated with participation?

There will be no financial benefits associated with participating in this research. However, this research setting provides you the opportunity to articulate and reflect upon your personal life in a non-judgemental and open space. You will also be contributing to the production of new knowledge in the field of gender and sexuality in Vietnam specifically and Southeast Asia more broadly.

What will happen to the information I provide?

Your contact details will be recorded on a password protected computer. The transcripts produced from the interview will be identified using pseudonyms. In the thesis and any resulting publications, you will be identified by your chosen pseudonym. Your personal information including age, educational background, and workplace will be altered to further secure your anonymity.

All data can only be accessed by the researcher, Ms Nhã, and your file will be stored under the provided pseudonym. All data will be kept securely and destroyed five years after the thesis is completed.

A copy of the thesis (and further publications) can be provided upon your request.

What are my rights as a participant?

- The right to withdraw from participation at any time
- The right to request that any recording cease
- The right to have any unprocessed data withdrawn and destroyed
- The right to have any questions about the research project answered at any time

Whom should I contact if I have any questions?

If you have questions about this research, please feel free to contact Ms Nhã: nguyen_nha@student.ceu.edu.

What other issues should I be aware of before deciding whether to participate?

In some cases, you may choose to discuss your experiences for more than two hours; however, you will not be required to provide more time if the interview is not completed within this time period. You might be asked to participate in a follow-up interview or to request one yourself; however, you are under no obligation to continue the interview if you do not wish at any time and for any reason.

Yours sincerely

Nguyễn Thị Thanh Nhã

Appendix C: Consent form

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Central European University
Quellenstrasse 51-55, 1100
Vienna, Austria

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN STUDY

I _____ agree to participate in the research project *Subjects-in-becoming: Theorizing sexual subjectivities of young, unmarried women from Hồ Chí Minh City, Vietnam*, being conducted by Nguyễn Thị Thanh Nhã, Department of Gender Studies, Central European University.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to explore how young, unmarried Vietnamese women are negotiating the changing landscape of urban Vietnam in their everyday lives and romantic relationships, focusing on sexuality.

I understand that I have been approached to participate in this project because I have been introduced by a friend or colleague as someone who may be willing to articulate and reflect upon my personal experience; and that my participation in this project will involve being interviewed for approximately 1-2 hours. I might be asked to have a follow-up conversation at a later point. During the interview(s), I will not be required to divulge any information about my personal experiences that I do not wish to share.

I am aware that I can contact Ms Nguyễn Thị Thanh Nhã if I have any concern about the research. I acknowledge that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to review, edit and / or withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied. I also understand that I am free to withdraw my participation from this research project at any time I wish, without consequences, and without giving a reason.

I understand that I can request a copy of the thesis upon completion.

The project is for the purposes of academic research; it will not be of direct benefit to me. The privacy of the personal information I provide will be safeguarded and only disclosed where I have consented to the disclosure or as required by law.

I agree that Ms Nguyễn Thị Thanh Nhã has answered all my questions fully and clearly.

I understand that the research data gathered from this project may be published in a form that does not identify me in any way.

Participants Consent

Participant: _____ Date: _____
(Signature)

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