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Public perceptions on LGBT issues in modern Vietnam

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Public Perceptions on LGBT Issues in Modern Vietnam

by

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Thesis

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Ypsilanti, Michigan

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my mom and dad, my brother, and Tung Lam and Thy Lam, who have been greatest supporters of mine through my whole life and made me who I am at this moment in my life. Their love and tolerance for me taught me to respect every single other person. I wish you all peace and happiness that you deserve.

Acknowledgement

Despite the limitations of the work, my ups and downs during my study in the U.S., this thesis is combined pieces of what I have learned. I would like to thank all professors at the Social Foundations of Education program: Dr. Joe Bishop, Dr. Pamela Smith, Dr. Joe Ramsey, Dr. Rebecca Martusewicz, and Dr. Christopher Robbins for pushing my limits so I can push the boundaries of thinking. The program helped me create a stronger ME in understanding and expressing my thoughts. All I have learned from all of you. I am taking back to my country of Vietnam to try to lay new foundations for justice, democracy, and equity, or simply just supporting others surrounding me at the most I can.

I can consider my thesis a “team work” because of the individuals and families who supported and encouraged me during my two years in the U.S.

My deepest thank you to:

TA

Coach Phil and Genie, Bac Janet and Stan Reedy,

The Roms and chi Phuong, Trang Dao, Thao Tran, Toan Nguyen

Begum, Nigora, Tshering, Mayank and the S2 - selfless someone who let me be me and

do it my way.

Appreciation toward you.

Abstract

This paper examines the history, culture, and policies in Vietnam as fundamentals for an analysis on one of the most emerging topics in the modern Vietnamese society: the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community. I have collected data from opinions and comments on different means of social media as representation of public opinion toward LGBT, which seem to most expressed in three aspects: lack of knowledge, stereotype, and prejudice; the categorization and labeling as Third World; and advocacy for LGBT equality. With the quite strict tradition and high stress on family ties, the challenge for the members of this community to advocate for their rights is quite high. Even though it is not easy to transform people's minds and change moral values, recent changes on positive side in this discourse allow us to hope for the best.

Table of Contents

Chapter I: Introduction.....	1
The Case of Vietnam	5
Chapter II: Methodology.....	6
Process	6
Literature Review.....	9
Chapter III: History and culture of Vietnam.....	23
History as Fundamental for Understanding the Values and Attitude of Vietnamese Public	23
Major Characteristics of the Culture.....	36
Chapter IV: Analysis and Discussion	47
Lack of understanding, Stereotyping, and Prejudice	48
The Third World	57
Advocacy for Equality	62
Chapter V: Conclusion and Suggestions.....	74
Queer and Buddhism.....	78
References.....	83

List of Figures

1. Sources of Social Media	7
2. Number of Comments from social media.....	8
3. Personality/Morality of the Homosexuals in the press.....	21
4. Language describing homosexuals in sample articles.....	22

Public Perceptions on LGBT Issues in Modern Vietnam

Chapter I: Introduction

Contemporary Vietnamese society has done away with many prejudices. Just a few years ago, simple common practices such as coloring one's hair, male piercing, making friends through the Internet, and holding hands in public were discouraged. Some more fundamental lifestyle choices such as divorce or cohabitation were also highly criticized. As society progresses, all those personal selections seem to have become increasingly familiar within society, and have won apparent acceptance. In the past two decades, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) issues have become a central focus of public attention. Previously, LGBT communities have only merited attention for their association with HIV and health programs. There was little understanding and no "rational" explanation that would be satisfactory to the public toward the matter. Many just remained invisible. As Blanc (2005) mentioned, "[O]ne could hear that there were no homosexuals in Vietnam or this practice was imported and Western" (p. 1).

With the changes that modernization and globalization brought to the society, many hidden individuals and couples found the conditions favorable enough to come out of the shadow and face the greatest judge of Vietnamese society: the community. Discussing the situation of men who have sex with men (MSM), Colby, Cao, and Doussantousse (2004) stated:

[...] Rapid economic growth and liberalizing social attitudes in the larger cities have allowed the emergence of large and increasingly visible homosexual populations. On the other hand, homosexuality is definitely not considered normal

or an acceptable lifestyle in Vietnam and the majority of homosexual men keep their sexual orientation secret. (p. 4)

In everyday life, there is also a lack of information about the LGBT community. Facts pertaining to LGBT were not taught in schools, and were rarely portrayed in the media. Negative bias made any non-heterosexual thought taboo in Vietnam. Until recently, together with prostitution and drug use, homosexuality was labeled a “social evil.” In 2002 homosexuality was declared a “social evil” by the Vietnamese media (Mueller, 2011). Media was the LGBT’s community number one enemy (Blanc, 2005; Khuat, 1998; Le, 2002). Ten years later, the situation had changed.

Today, there are more and more articles, books, and images of sexuality appearing via the public media. Although change is slow, it is undeniable. The existence of homosexuals in Vietnamese society is now readily admitted. In fact, media has begun to enthusiastically support the LGBT community’s emergence from the underground. In the article “Unlikely Vietnam considers same-sex marriage,” Mason (2012) explains:

Vietnam’s state-run media unable to write about politically sensitive topics or openly criticize the one-party government, have embraced the chance to explore gay issues. They have run lengthy newspaper stories and television broadcasts, including one live special that won a top award.

In 1997 the first publicized gay wedding ceremony went online, starting a new wave of couples coming out to the public by simply having their photos and wedding videos posted online. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender events and organizations of all kinds have proliferated, ranging from professional meetings, clubs, and conferences, to more political movements like the First Pride parade. The most surprising, yet good,

news for the community is the Ministry of Justice's voice on the possibility of legalizing same-sex marriage in Vietnam. If the Ministry of Justice followed through, Vietnam would become the first country in Asia to allow same-sex marriage. As Justice Minister Ha Hung Cuong said on July 24, 2012, in a nationwide broadcast also available on the Internet:

I think, as far as human rights are concerned, it is time for us to look at the reality.

The number of homosexuals has mounted to hundreds of thousands. It is not a small figure. They live together without registering marriage. They may own property. We, of course, have to handle issues legally.

Although the issue remains off the table, just the fact that there might be such a possibility has resulted in many positive societal changes. First, the general knowledge that can lead to more in-depth understanding of the public on the LGBT matter will increase; Society will progress from ignorance about this community's existence to acknowledgement and understanding of it. Second, for the LGBT community, it is a first but crucial step in recognizing them in society as well as recognizing their legal rights.

Throughout history, in many societies, sexuality has been under discussion related only to concepts of sexual activities and sensations; Foucault (1990) believed that sexual meanings are social and cultural constructs. Additionally, due to its nature of being involved in and corresponding with human relationships, sexuality is also highly political. Sexuality is no longer a representation of one's desire and needs; it has become a means to build and control the society. Foucault asks the questions:

Why has sexuality been so widely discussed and what has been said about it?

What were the effects of power generated by what was said? What are the links

between these discourses, these effects of power, and the pleasures that were invested by them? What knowledge (*savoir*) was formed as a result of this linkage? (p. 24)

He answers the questions by describing a whole new set of proprietary rules in the domain of sexuality, and a growing sense of prohibition, censorship, and general silencing of sexual discussion. Foucault (1990) argued:

[T]here emerged a political, economic and technical incitement to talk about sex. And not so much in the form of a general theory of sexuality as in the form of analysis, stocktaking, classification and specification, of quantitative or causal studies. (p. 24)

And since sexuality and sex started to be politicized, it began to be silenced and pushed into the privacy of homes. Sex became a discourse that would control the relationships in the society and it was decided that it needed to be covered. Berlant and Warner (1998) argue that in the existing society we have been connecting sex to the negative images of “adult” markets for print, lap dancing, pornography, and so on. Little is it understood that sexuality represents more than just nudity, intercourse, or generally what eyes can see. Sexuality and its power became another means of domination. Therefore, the minorities and the groups that are categorized as different by the general public face many challenges in being identified and being able to express themselves.

The bigger the fear of marginalized groups coming into light, the greater power struggle. Therefore, the minority groups are acknowledged to be a part of society, yet they are sorted into restrictive, simplistic categories the system can more easily understand and control. The values in the current world came down to numbers and

categories, rather than relationships, feelings, and emotions. Even though the existence of different identities is recognized, the dominant culture responds to perceived marginality with labeling and objectification (Butler, 1994).

The Case of Vietnam

As explained above, the situation of the LGBT community in Vietnam has mainly changed within the last two decades. One of the major reasons for the change has been ongoing modernization and open-door policies that allowed international influences, and provided new technologies and opportunities for social interaction, including the Internet. People's views became more open and more accepting toward new "trends." The government, as well, adjusted many policies that had been implemented during the years of colonialism, feudalism, and system of budget subsidy. However, to really understand how much both public and the government views have changed on traditional values in general, and perceptions of issues surrounding LGBT in particular, it is necessary to analyze the culture, and how values changed under the influence of modernization. Moreover, from an examination of Vietnamese history, this thesis will also provide knowledge of a political system that shapes the society and public view.

Chapter II: Methodology

Process

In order to provide the best possible result, the thesis begins with an examination of domestic and international research. To provide the fundamentals for further study as well as a representation in media, I studied articles online about research that was carried out within the past two decades on the LGBT community. To better understand the operation of society and its values, the thesis will investigate historical materials to explain Vietnam's cultural roots and to understand the role and actions of the Communist Party of Vietnam as the legal enforcer of social norms. This thesis will challenge pre-existing attitudes and prejudices with objective inquiry and argument.

The process of writing this thesis will include the examination of secondary resources including those that describe community and its beliefs and values. The thesis depends on materials from the researches carried in a corporation between domestic and international individuals and corporations as well as publications in the most recent years. Some of the research and reports studied already described the media representation of the LGBT community.

It must be emphasized that the public viewpoint represented in the thesis is representative only of those who use social media to express their opinions. Due to limitations of distance and the impracticality of first-hand research, this paper examines comments on articles, forums, videos, and Facebook postings, where people have free and equal rights of creation, access, and development of personal opinions. Facebook pages examined were *Tình Yêu Trai Việt* (Vietnamese Male love), *Táo Xanh* (Green Apple), *Tôi không Kỳ thị Người Đồng tính* (I don't stigmatize Homosexuals), *Tôi ủng hộ*

người chuyển giới (I support transgender), *Hội ủng hộ hôn nhân đồng tính tại Việt Nam* (Supporters of Vietnamese same sex marriage), *Chúng tôi ủng hộ tình yêu đồng tính* (We support same sex love), *Hội đứng lên ủng hộ hôn nhân đồng giới Việt* (Standing up for same sex marriage in Vietnam), *Cộng đồng PFLAG.vn* (PFLAG.vn Community), *Chúng tôi là Trangsgay* (We are Trangsgay), *Trung Tâm ICS* (ICS center), *Viện nghiên cứu Xã hội, Kinh tế & Môi trường ISEE* (The Institute for Studies of Society, Economics and Environment), *Thế giới thứ Ba.vn* (The Third World), *Sắc màu Acoustic* (Colors of Acousitc), *Vấn đề mới dưới lăng kính mở* (New issues under new lenses), Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (Vietnamese), and LGBT Confessions (Vietnamese). Three major forums used were <http://forum.hiv.com.vn> , <http://www.tinhyeutraiviet.com/forum/>, <http://taoxanh.net/forum/forum.php>, and comments in online press, as well as YouTube videos related to the LGBT community in Vietnam. Of the total 72 social media examined, the following chart represents sources of the used comments. As can be seen, the data were gathered from three Forums, 18 Facebook pages, 23 online press articles, and 28 YouTube videos (Figure 1).

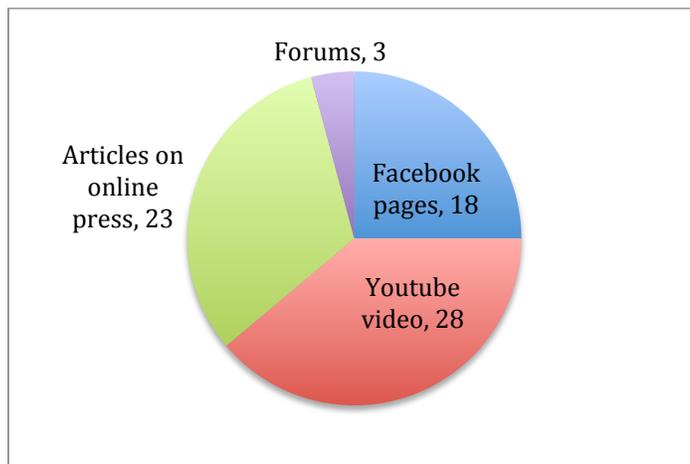


Figure 1. Sources of social media

After examining the posts, articles, pages, and videos, I drew comments from those sources and used these as data for thematic analysis for this thesis (Figure 2). In the discussion, these data will be incorporated with information about the history and culture of Vietnam for better analysis of the topic. I applied theories by different international scholars on homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgender discourse, namely Butler, Wilchins, Duggan, and specialists on the issue in Vietnam, such as Khuat, Nguyen, and Le. To ensure anonymity, no names will be posted, and no web links will be referenced when quoting from the data. Moreover, I did not actively participate in the conversations.

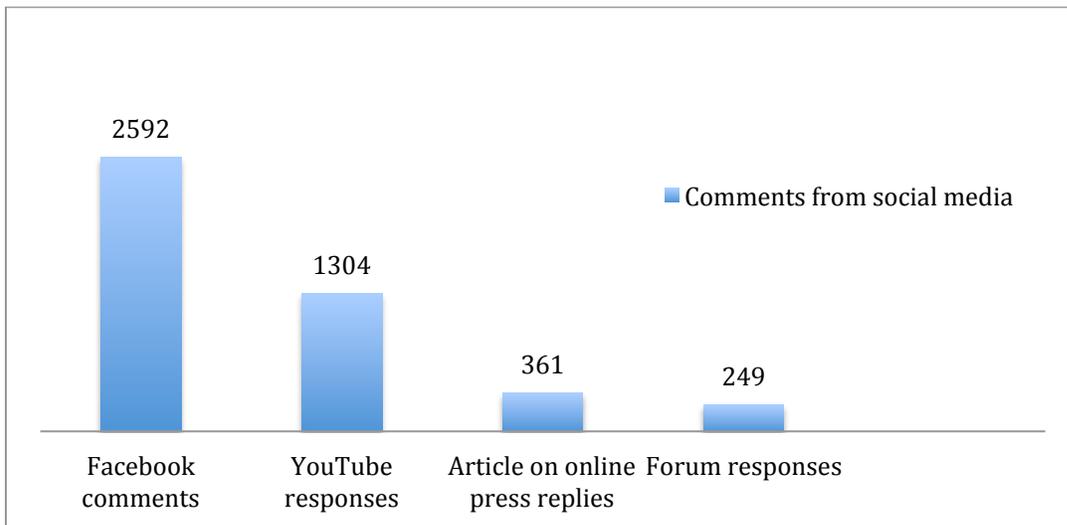


Figure 2. Number of Comments from social media

Electronic media fit well with content analysis as Krippendorff (1989) explained a growth of content analysis in the context of social networks, “[F]irst, the new and more powerful electronic media of communication could no longer be treated as an extension of the newspapers” (p. 15). In agreement with that, I believe in the convenience and higher ability to gather public opinion by using data provided on electronic sources. Another reason that Krippendorff mentions include that “the period following the economic crisis brought numerous social and political problems to which mass media

were thought to be causal” (p. 15). Or as his explained, “the emergence of empirical methods of inquiry in the social sciences” (p. 15) allows for the expression of the public perception more openly and easily about this social science issue. Based on Krippendorff arguments, we can confirm that data gathered from electronic sources are also reliable and satisfactory source of information. The content analysis will be divided based on the most common themes that appear in the comments. Despite the fact that they might include both negative and positive attitudes, the discussion will be carried based on the three prevalent topics from the comments.

Some limitations to the compelling conclusions presented in this thesis are inevitable due to various challenges. The first, as this is a relatively new area of inquiry, scholarly materials related to the subject are few, and have all been published within the last 20 years. Other research data, such as online discussions, go back no more than about a decade. Additionally, many of the sources are in Vietnamese. All translations of information and these source quotes are the work of the researcher unless otherwise indicated. Every effort has been made to provide each translated statement’s full meaning.

Last but not least, the international community has debated questions about human rights in Vietnam for at least two decades, and the Communist Party of Vietnam forbids mentioning this topic. Thus this paper refrains from explicit comment on human rights as they relate to the LGBT community within Vietnam.

Literature review

First mentioned in public in Vietnam by 1992, the LGBT community and issues related to it are quite new to the traditional society of Vietnam as it undergoes

modernization. Although the terms *LGBT* or *queer* appeared relatively recently in Vietnamese academia and research, the concept of homosexuality or transgender is well-known to the Vietnamese public; some historic cases are known to the public as well as used in everyday life.

First of all, we need to clarify the use of the terms of *LGBT* and *queer* in this thesis. LGBT stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender, and its members and community. There are many different ways of understanding the term *queer*; however, here queer is used as “an umbrella term, which embraces a matrix of sexual preferences, orientations, and habits of the non-exclusive- heterosexual-and-monogamous majority. Queer includes lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transpeople, and intersex persons, the radical sex communities, and many other sexually transgressive (underworld) explorers” (UC Riverside, 2003-2004). Therefore, it represents the acknowledgement that the different-from-traditional-and-common definition of gender and sexual orientation also exists. Although in history there were circumstances where the term was used in a negative way, in this thesis I use it only with the meaning of self-identification explained above.

Many histories have been written on dynasties of Vietnam providing general information about the royal family members. One specific book, *Kể chuyện các Vua Nguyễn* (Stories about Kings of the Nguyen dynasty) by Tôn Thất Bình from 1993, Thuan Hoa publishing house, discusses King Khai Dinh. The author argued that King Khai Dinh had homosexual tendencies. The book was published in Vietnam in 1993, but today it is impossible to find any copy of it in Vietnam. The book, however, was found at the University of Michigan library in Ann Arbor.

As Ton (1993) argues, King Khai Dinh of the Nguyen dynasty, who ruled for 10 years from (1916-1925), preferred males over females despite having 12 wives. Ton states:

King Khai Dinh did not like women. Although he liked watching performances, but he did not like to watch women perform. His folk dance group only consisted of male performers. When the play had a female character, male would play a female role. Therefore, Thanh Binh music group under King Khai Dinh dynasty had a lot of excellent male playing female roles. (p. 139)

Ton continues, saying that although King Khai Dinh did not like women and to be close to them, he still had to have wives and concubines, but he was extremely indifferent in bed. Many of them thought it was their fault, one even leaving poems about loneliness; “she was suffering from a great misery, not because she was not beautiful enough to attract the King or because he had too many wives, but because King Khai Dinh only liked... man” (p. 140).

There appear to be some other examples from the period when the royal families still existed to prove Vietnamese culture and history was familiar with concepts of homosexuality or transgender. For instance, Vietnamese society is also familiar with the usage of the concept “Ái nam, ái nữ,” which means half man-half woman. This term mainly refers to transgender as a description of their biological sex and the way they identify themselves not unifying. In the old history of Vietnam, it was commonly used in descriptions of eunuchs. Eunuchs who worked as royal servants were castrated at a young age. They were raised and educated in separate places in order to later convey the King’s orders at their best. Even though there are no records indicating that eunuchs were

transgender, they were always portrayed as particularly feminine and behaving androgynously. The point here is not to argue whether eunuchs had transgender tendencies, especially because as young boys they must have had little input into the decisions their parents and palace representatives made, but more importantly to affirm that the concept of transgender is known, and the term has been used widely in the society. It became broadly used to describe anyone who expresses signs of sexual identity contrary to his or her birth assignment.

It should be acknowledged that Vietnamese academia did not develop until after the Renovation policy in 1986; therefore, to find scholarly materials is a great challenge. As mentioned previously, for at least the first 10 years of the topic being public, it was connected to the issues of HIV/ AIDS and other “social evil.” The term “social evil,” simply put, means actions and behaviors carried out by a member of a society that are against the law and, even more crucially in Vietnam, against social forms. More importantly, those actions and behaviors negatively affect other members in the society and bring undesired consequences for health and morality of those individuals or groups, as well as the whole social order. In the society that is so much based on following particular societal models, those exhibiting actions categorized as “social evil” are bad role models. As a result, they are not only influencing their own generation, but also the next generation. As Barr (1997) said in his article, the globalized economy is a “mixed bag.” He quoted Major General Tran Giang, the former head of Association of Vietnamese War Veterans in Hanoi: “We realized that when we opened the door, both good and bad things would come in.” There are many social evils that Vietnam has been facing, most of them notable after the 1990s such as prostitution, drug abuse, and

gambling. Barr (1997) also states, “Vietnam's government is doing something - executing convicted drug smugglers, talking about the need to restore traditional and even revolutionary values, and promising to correct economic problems that may contribute to ‘social evils.’” The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2008) carried out research in Britain regarding social evil in their country; the foundation’s conclusions regarding “Who and what influences social evil?” can be applied to Vietnam as well. As Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s research indicated, most commonly cited as responsible for social evils were government and the media. The government was seen to be out of touch with the real issues people face and to be ineffective at tackling social problems. The media were criticized for fuelling negative and damaging attitudes and behaviors. Big business and religion were also said to be responsible: religion was identified as a cause of conflict and confusion, and significant businesses were blamed for fuelling inequality and consumerism (p. 3).

With respect to the LGBT community, the social evil connected to it was mainly men who have sex with men (MSM) and HIV/AIDS. Therefore, it can be seen that the first images of homosexuality in Vietnam started quite negatively. In the period from 1993 to 2001, “[T]here were only three behavioral surveys of HIV risk factors that [directly] targeted MSM in Vietnam” (Colby, Cao, & Doussantousse, 2004, p. 48) carried out by CARE International (1993), Save the Children (UK; 1997) and most recently in 1993 with some international collaboration. While the explication of complex medical concepts and issues surrounding HIV/AIDS is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is necessary to point out some of the remarks from the cited research to understand the negative portrayal of MSM in particular and the LGBT community in general.

Moreover, this brief examination will show quite a surprising perception of “fake” and “real” homosexuality. Not going specifically into any of the three researchers, some of the results indicate the wishful thinking of those involved in same sex intercourse. Colby, Cao, & Doussantousse (2004) state that more than one third of MSM believe that having intercourse with a man was safer than intercourse with women. Moreover, a higher number of them had multiple partners and were not aware of risk of HIV/AIDS or even other STDs (Colby, 2003). Their limited knowledge about disease transmission and frequency puts them in the target group for the HIV/AIDS. Because of that they also become a target for the public. On the other hand, MSM are mostly associated with Commercial Sex Workers (CSW) who serves foreign tourists and rich Vietnamese living abroad. This fact helped create unfavorable public opinion for at least the first decade of public discourse on homosexuality in Vietnam. Although the perception toward them was negative, in the starting years of HIV/AIDS disease spread in Vietnam they were not too much of a concern. The Vietnam Ministry of Health plan in 1990 confirmed the above concerns:

Homosexual behavior probably occurs in Viet Nam as in most other countries, but there are no formal meeting places or organized homosexual groups. This mode of transmission is, therefore, not considered to contribute significantly to an eventual spread of HIV in Viet Nam. (p. 11)

The limitation in knowledge of the government and public about the LGBT community is also evidenced in their perception of “True” and “Fake” homosexuals, especially regarding MSM group. Even until 2002, the Head of the communication department of the National AIDS Committee just guessed that number of homosexuals in

Vietnam is only few hundred. The public very much underestimates this group and disregards them as a part of the society. This is proved by the fact that the official channels do not know the exact number, and even called some of them “fake.” A common belief about MSM in Vietnam is that most are “not truly homosexual but merely temporarily following Western fashion or trend” (Colby, Cao, & Doussantousse, 2004, p. 47). The authors also mention the brochure from 2001 on HIV prevention carried by Vietnamese advisers and international nongovernmental organization CARE International that describes two homosexual kinds of men in Vietnam and argue that genuinely gay people are truly rare, and most are fake, “lured by fashion or experimentation into trying homosexuality and who will eventually turn to a heterosexual lifestyle.” The research of Blanc (2005) also confirmed the same theme regarding homosexuals being influenced by the west.

Although the men who have sex with men group may be increasingly visible, there has been particularly little published research on homosexuality itself in Vietnam (Khuat, 1998), and as a reminder it is necessary to note that they are more connected to the concept of Commercial Sex Workers rather than homosexuals. Because of the issue not being brought to the public, there was also a scarcity of people officially identifying themselves as LGBT for research purposes. Most of the early research on LGBT until now has been carried on in cooperation with international organizations and non-profit organizations (NGO) such as UNICEF, Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere International (CARE), and Oxfam. More recently, many Vietnamese institutions and organizations have been established with focuses including topics related to sex, and sexuality and the LGBT community in Vietnam, such as Information

Connecting and Sharing (ICS), Institute for Social, Economic and Environmental studies (ISec), the Institute for Social Development studies (ISDS) and so forth. Many of them still carry out research on the homosexual community, together with investigations of other aspects of society, trends, and reproductive health. The difference is LGBT being mentioned as a separate group in the researches. Despite growing interest in research into the LGBT community, the major sources of the information are still media such as newspapers, magazines and, with increase of Internet usage, online newspapers and other social media including blogs, forums, Facebook, and even YouTube.

The media are another good example of conflict between “tradition” and the influence of globalization. Although most media is state controlled and censored, social media represent a breakaway from that one-dimensional point of view that represents what the State wants people to know. With the process of global integration the Internet boom, freedom of communication and self-expression has also rapidly increased. Media became a tool not just for learning information, but also for verifying its reliability.

Media, especially social media that allow people to “clarify” what was misunderstood about certain concepts or groups of people, are also a helpful and meaningful way to advocate for themselves. As noted above, there is not much academic research on homosexuality, especially domestically, thus the main source of information would be traditional newspapers as well as online press. These have developed mostly within approximately the last 10 years, beginning with reporting on the first Vietnamese same-sex marriage in 1998 (the marriage was not official, but more of a reception only for the closest friends and family). Elevation of the topic beyond the previous negative

misconceptions of homosexuality belonging only in the limit, somewhat tawdry realms of HIV/AIDS and other STDs, or the sex trade.

Being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender carried its own topic and began to represent many other aspect of the issue besides the negative connection from the past. Other very crucial and familiar media that widely represent aspects of the LGBT community are literature, cinematography and broadcasting, in which the public is remarkably accepting of the image, but which often present misleading information or characterizations.

In the past, there were rumors of some of the most famous poet and writers of Vietnam during wartime being gay; however, because it was not open and clear we have no proof. The matter here is again to confirm that Vietnamese people and the public are familiar with this concept. In modern times, together with the boom of global interaction, Vietnamese literature, cinematography and entertainment also experienced radical liberation in terms of existence and creativity of this kind of forms of art. Regarding the literature, in comparison with the world's writers, the amount and level of digging into the topic, what Vietnamese books represent, it is still remarkably basic and raw. Nonetheless, looking within Vietnamese literature itself, it is a tremendous step. The first book that made it to bookstores was Bui Van Tuan's *Một thế giới không có đàn bà* (A World without Women) published in 2000. In an interview in 2005, Bui Anh Tuan shared, "[I]n Vietnam, this topic is not banned; however, most of the authors rather avoid it. Because of the lack of information, the understanding of everyone about homosexuals usually leads to negative aspects, making homosexuality equal to things vicious, diseases, social evils. Misunderstanding leads to wrong behavior, which results in homosexuals get

complexes, struggling in life.” Years later, many other books were published (with my raw title translation into English) such as other books by Bui Anh Tuan, *Les – Vòng tay không đàn ông* (Les- The arms without men), *Không và Sắc* (Nothing and Color), *Phương pháp của A.C Kinsey* (Methods of A.C Kinsey); *Keng Dị bản* (Variants); Vũ Đình Giang’s *Song song* (Parallel), *Ngôi nhà Mondrian* (Mondrian’s house), *Cây rắn lục* (Viper tree); Trần Thùy Mai’s *Bầy thú bông của Quỳnh* (Quynh’s teddy bears); Nguyễn Thơ Sinh’s *Chuyện tình Lesbian và Gay* (Gay and Lesbian’s love stories); Nguyễn Quỳnh Trang’s *1981*; Nguyễn Đình Tú’s *Nháp* (Draft); Trang Hạ’s *Những đốm lửa trên Vịnh Tử Tây* (The flame on the western Gulf of Death); Nguyễn Văn Dũng’s autobiography *Bóng* (Shadow); Phạm Thành Trung’s *Thành phố không lạc loài* (Not lost/alone in the city), Quynh Trang’s *198X*; Thuy Anna’s *Lạc giới* (Genderlost); Le Hoai Anh’s *Xin lỗi em, anh đã yêu anh ấy* (I apologize, but I am in love with HIM) etc.

Not only in the publishing sphere has there been more discussion of this topic, but also in the milieu of TV and the silver screen. The public has become much more familiar with characters representing homosexuals or transgender such as “Đề mai tính” (Fool for love), “Trai nhảy” (Dance boy), “Hot boy nổi loạn” (Hot boys go crazy), “Những nụ hôn rực rỡ” (Vibrant kisses), “2 in 1”, “Cảm hứng hoàn hảo” (Perfect inspiration) or “Chơi voi” (Lone). Although those productions did not fully focus on homosexuality or transgender, they included some LGBT characters, quite naturally as a part of daily life. Still, the unfavorable part, was the way those characters were embodied - fully stereotypical of image of homosexuals and transgender to Vietnamese society. Gay appeared as highly feminine, biting, puny and sickly, with discouraging mannerisms such as too flirtatious even toward people with families, or too sex-obsessed. They were also

represented as being a joke in the movies or shows. As a result, again we can see that representations of the LGBT community, although entertaining, still were and are more caricatures than nuanced and respectful portrayals of human beings with multi-dimensional problems and motivations.

In the period from 2007- 2012, the articles on the Internet mostly introduced two types. Even with a better understanding of issues of LGBT, public still categorized it with different names of “unhealthy” or “immoral.” On the other hand, there were articles presenting respect and understanding toward the queer.

Articles with “unhealthy” and “immoral” titles.	Articles with voices of the ones advocating for equality and displaying tolerance and respect to the queer world.
“Sleeplessness to treat the disease of...homosexuality for their child”	“Toward Tolerance”
“Who is a culprit causing “the disease” of homosexuality...?”	“Vietnamese high school pupils accepting of homosexuality”
“Homosexuals and tragedy of being denied by family”	“Daily activity to shed light on gay Vietnam”
“Struggling in the Third World”	“Homosexuality is not a disease!”
“The confession on the honeymoon”	“Vietnam Making Gay marriage happen in Vietnam”
“Am I male or female”	

Further analysis of these articles and representations of social media through public opinion and comments are carried out below; anyhow, at this point we can make some first conclusions. Firstly, until 1990s there was no clear research on the LGBT community. Secondly, the research that came out in the following years represented homosexuals in relation to HIV/AIDS, putting them into high-risk behavior group. Nowadays, when there is more information about the prevalence and diversity on the LGBT community, there still exist many misconceptions.

In 2010, Institute for Study of Society, Economics and Environment (iSEE), Vietnam published a report “Sending the wrong messages – The Portrayal of Homosexuality in the Vietnamese printed and online press,” that perfectly summarized the portrayal of the LGBT community in the media. It is believed that two tables from the research used in this thesis, can well summarize the image of homosexuals in the Vietnamese press. The study examined 502 articles in four main newspapers, including “Thanh Niên”, “Tuổi Trẻ”, “Tiên Phong”, “Công A Nhân Dân”, and six online news websites. The publication year of those articles were 2004, 2006 and the first two quarters of 2008. Figure 3 (iSee Report, 2010, p. 17) below describes homosexuals in the press in terms of morality/ personality. As the report analyzes:

125 articles, accounting for 25% of the total studied, indirectly mentioned the morality of the homosexuals through related issues. Of these articles, only about 26% portrayed homosexual people as ‘normal’ in the same way as heterosexual people, but up to 29% refer to crimes in many forms, from stealing, robbery, to murder, trafficking. 24% portray the homosexual group with ‘abnormal’ social

behaviors, and 16% portrayed them as having ‘indulgent’ lifestyles, ‘immoral’ behaviors and ‘corrupt’ personality. (p. 17)

Personality/Morality of the Homosexuals in the press

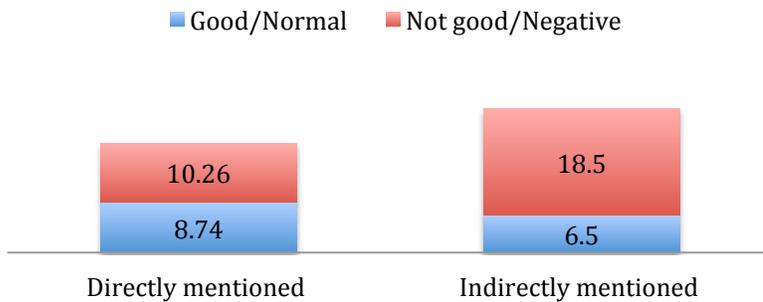


Figure 3. Personality/Morality of Homosexuals in the press (%) (iSee Report, 2010, p. 17)

Below Figure 4 (iSee Report, 2010, p. 22) “Language describing homosexuals in sample articles” examines articles from the perspective of the language used. And although the research will go more in depth about language in the following parts, it is necessary to have basic facts on it. From the table, among 7 different groups of languages and representation of the attitude toward the LGBT community, only two groups are positive and humane, while five left are negative, named very specifically as shocking, disrespectful, against social and ethical norms, terror or health/disease related.

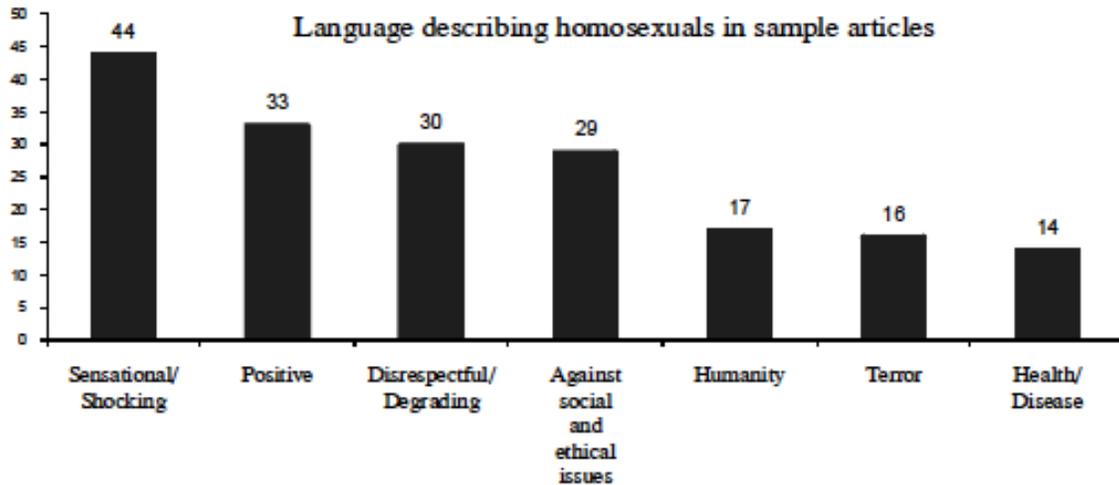


Figure 4. Language describing homosexuals in sample articles (iSee report, 2010, p. 19)

Nevertheless, the positive factor of the development of the idea is that at least issues on LGBT are discussed in the public and are becoming a discourse in the public eyes, instead of being “silenced.” Public exploration of the issues created the enabling voicing of this issue created the fundamentals for clarification of this discourse. If mass media allowed haters to raise their voice, similarly it also created supporters of LGBT issues, and established their allies.

Chapter III: History and culture of Vietnam

History as fundamental for understanding the values and attitude of Vietnamese public

The history of a country is an undeniable factor in the creation of its culture, and in how its various, diverse elements relate to one another. What Vietnam has gone through as a country doubtlessly plays a significant role in cultivating the dynamics of relationships in the development of Vietnamese society. This revision of Vietnamese history does not aim at archiving the events of the past, but allowing to use its details to interpret as well as understand the history as a form of inquiry that provides us fresher outlook on the current issues. On the other hand, as long and broad as history can be, the thesis will only focus on parts that directly affected the social system. To be more specific, I concentrate on the parts of the history that affected the social change the most, and therefore influenced the assumptions and view of the most traditional aspects.

Vietnam was constantly at war for thousands of years; therefore, in the society nowadays we can see pieces and bits of foreign influence. At times, those influences had similarities with Vietnamese traditional beliefs, such as during the war with China or Japan. At other times, the culture brought to the country was totally shocking and went against the traditional values at many levels, particularly during the French colonial and American war periods. At that point of history, the public believed that those western influences negatively affected the conservative traditions that had existed for centuries. However, in the modern world, many believe that this influence contributed to the development of new social contracts. For instance, the development of the technology that allows the public to educate themselves, training and skills provided by international

organizations in order to improve skills such as advocacy, creating support groups, or generally just the confidence in one's ability to make a change. The thesis will briefly analyze the wartime and postcolonial eras in Vietnam to introduce the changes that happened to the society. The major focus will be on the period after 1986 when the Renovation policy took place - the policy that probably had one of the biggest impacts on where the Vietnamese society stands now.

Vietnam as a state or, more accurately, as a coherent civilization, is believed to have been established in VII or VI century B.C.E., and was named Van Lang. About four centuries later, when Vietnam was building its culture and society, the first invader came to Vietnam. This was the beginning of a 2000-year-long period of colonialism, wars and occupation. The first and most persevering attackers of Vietnam were the Chinese. Although the Vietnamese showed their fierceness and bravery, the victories over Chinese armies could not continue for long because of the limited number of soldiers and weapons. Only by using their minds and having a clever strategy, Vietnamese were able to win some battles, but war and influence that the Chinese had on Vietnamese society would be widely spread. The Ancient Vietnamese civilization still maintained its vitality in the first few hundred years of the Chinese period of domination.

However, the Vietnamese did not eschew all the impact from Chinese culture, and selectively absorbed exogenous cultural elements to enrich its own culture (Dao, 2005). There were two significant ways of this impact, one through a peaceful approach; very often through a natural migration process when people would move and bring along their culture. Many of the Chinese people started settling on Vietnamese lands, participating in agricultural production and just becoming a part of daily life. However, the other way

was much more forceful, by military and administrative forces. Besides the people of China, many representatives of the Chinese administrative body also moved to Vietnam. They took the land and property of Vietnamese people to make it their own. Moreover, they opened schools to teach Chinese as well as Chinese etiquette. Modes of dress, agricultural methods, and even marriage rituals were all taught according to Chinese styles and technology (Khuat, Le, & Nguyen, 2009).

The level of Chinese domination did not stop there, not only did they require Vietnamese people to live based on their style, but they also charged high taxes by collecting properties and goods; they also made a production and sale of salt their monopoly. Vietnamese people were forced to obey Chinese law, and to adopt a truly tough and unfair feudalistic way of life. Most noticeable and longest lasting influence from Chinese culture was Confucianism and its values, which will be discussed more deeply below in this thesis. Therefore, it can be seen that the foundation of Vietnamese culture already includes a Chinese context, and slowly the pure Vietnamese tradition became Chino-Vietnamese (Han-Viet) culture, which could only be more and more influential during their thousand years of occupation (Dao, 2005). Confucian values are fundamentally based on the idea of harmony in the universe. However, the harmony does not necessarily mean equality. Because Confucianism puts man at the top of the social hierarchy, in order to balance the “harmony,” women would be at its bottom, more specifically as one very submissive and worthy of men’s attention. Women’s life would be based on few major principles: The Three Submissions (*Tam Tòng*) or The Four Virtues (*Tứ Đức*). According to the Three Submissions, woman would have to be completely obedient to the men in her life starting with her father, later her husband, and

at the end her son when her husband passes away. On the other hand, The Four Virtues principles include *công-dung-ngôn-hạnh*, which can be simply explained as Hardworking, Beautiful, Well-spoken and Well-behaved. The hard work is represented by women's skillfulness in taking care of the house and children, which includes cooking, sewing, and cleaning, but she was not required to be literate. The beautiful aspect of the Four Virtues required women to take care of her physical appearance to be able to please her husband, but not to attract any outsiders. Not only was physical appearance important, but also the way she presented herself must have been graceful and charming. The well-spoken aspect dictated women to be humble and submissive in her words, and by no means be rough or shrewish. Women were also required to be well behaved, which meant to ensure her dignity through love and care for the husband and children. Despite the gender inequality and androcentric approach of Confucianism, men also face the pressure of constant improvement to remain on the top of the social hierarchy. Confucianism stresses that every man should strive for his own improvement and development of himself - a task without surcease until he reaches the top. This goal states that above all things determined to attain, relatively, every moment of his life - that is to "abide in the highest excellence" of which he is at the moment capable. As Confucius says in "The Great Learning," "What one should abide in being known, what should be aimed at is determined; upon this decision, unperturbed resolve is attained; to this succeeds tranquil poise; this affords opportunity for deliberate care; through such deliberation the goal is achieved" (Dawson, M.M. 2005, p. 7). Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a clear division of gender roles, where each man and woman in

the society had a role and goal. These “guidelines” of the social order started from the Chinese occupational period and clearly continued until the age of Feudalism.

During the Chinese occupation period Vietnam engaged in many battles, and victories from time-to-time allowed return to partial and fragile freedom.

However, not escaping from foreign domination for a long time, Vietnam continued to be colonized by the French from 1858 to 1945. Again, Vietnam underwent dramatic exploitation of its natural and human resources. Meanwhile, the French also stopped people’s ongoing revolution. The last kings of the Nguyen dynasty – the last dynasty in Vietnam also lost their power to decide on national policies. They become French puppets who gave up national freedom for their own interests. During the same period, Vietnam also had Japanese armies coming to their land. Although Vietnam had to continue living under occupation, the French colonial period was critical in many aspects. It ended more than a thousand years of Chinese occupation. Together with Confucian values, culturally, French brought into Vietnam some new western influence and ways of life (Truong, Dinh, and Le, 1999).

In 1945, under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) with leadership from Ho Chi Minh, Vietnamese people overthrew French and Japanese administration, especially the feudalistic society that had been in place for centuries, to establish a Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The new nation hoped for all its citizens to be the owners of their country where its citizens lived with equality and without exploitation. However, in August 1945 the French attacked the South of Vietnam again, starting the recolonization of Vietnam for a second time. In December 1946, the French sent an ultimatum to the Government in the North to hand in all the weapons and give up.

The Government of Vietnam understood that this was a “live or die” moment for Vietnam, therefore, the president of Vietnam at that time, Ho Chi Minh, called upon the whole nation to revolt. Not getting what they requested, the French steadily moved from South to North for the attack. They were able to settle in Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, but unable to control the whole North as they tried to do in the South. Although the French occupied the capital, people of Vietnam in the surrounding areas were capable of taking charge and starting the revolution. The more the French fought, the weaker they became; meanwhile Vietnamese armies became much more powerful. By 1950, the Vietnamese army took an initiative and was powerful enough to fight bigger battles. In only 3 years, Vietnam totally changed the circumstances of the war. The French continuously demanded land from Vietnam, as well as soldiers and weapons, in order to bring them to victory. Their plan was to defend and establish a solid base in the North while trying to remain in power in the South. Meanwhile, with help from the U.S. army, at one of the top most parts of Vietnam, the base of Dien Bien Phu was built. The French planned to use it as a trap for the Vietnamese army, however, in May 1954, Dien Bien Phu was totally wiped out by the Vietnamese army, catching all 16,000 French soldiers.

Between 1945 and 1954, responding to the call of the President at that time, both men and women contributed to the fights against the French colonial power. While men directly fought on the fields, women worked on the rice fields to ensure the food production to supply the army as well as their families. In many cases, women themselves would directly participate in the fighting. With shown solidarity and sacrifice of their lives for the independence of the country, Vietnam achieved their desired victory. This was a revolution that had an international impact. The loss forced France to sign the

Geneva Accords, which declared Vietnam and whole Indochina (Laos and Cambodia) to be free of external rule. The victory of Vietnam became a motivation for revolution in many other countries, especially those who were also French colonies.

This was thought to be the end of Western influence in Vietnam, but not long after France left, America started to provide military advisors to the South and settled there. They created a Vietnamese puppet government and suppressed any who stood against them. The war between Vietnamese and American forces continued from then until 1975. In those 20 years, Americans used a variety of tools to occupy Vietnamese lands and people. During this war, Vietnam went through enormous political, social and economic transitions. The North of Vietnam was preparing for war in the South, meanwhile advancing the North to socialism without going through the phase of capitalism. As a result, between 1953 and 1958, the government implemented land reform and the collectivization of the agricultural sector, while re-educating the industrial and commercial sector. These measures were aimed at eliminating private ownership and creating equality among different social classes and categories. Together with this economic reform, the reform of culture and ideology also started to change.

For many, this was an opportunity to escape from the traditional and conservative code of conduct that limited their lives and choices to the “narrow interpretation of the Three Rules, Five Convictions, or the Four Virtues” (Khuat, Le & Nguyen, 2009, p. 57). The formal breakthrough in Vietnamese social life was the issue of the Law on Marriage and Family in 1959, which for the first time recognized that Vietnamese people have the right to choose their spouses, instead of limiting themselves to the arranged marriages that were the main way of getting married in the times before that. Article 4 of this Law

stated, “Men and Women reaching appropriate age are free to decide on their marriage; neither side should use force to proceed or prevent the marriage against the will of the other.” President Ho Chi Minh established love as the foundation for marriage relationships believing that this Law would positively affect the reproduction of the Vietnamese in order to implement social equality. During the following decades, the North Vietnam focused more on the agricultural, industrial, and Cultural Revolution. The Vietnamese people were encouraged to fight for a good cause: wealthy citizens and strong country where every individual contributes to the establishment of a progressive, civilized and fair society with a respectable and enjoyable life for its member. This was the ideology that mobilized and organized the society. While developing the society, Vietnam was still in the war with the American troops. Like all the previous times, Vietnamese people were willing and ready to grab a weapon and fight for the country. The propaganda and the movements announced by Ho Chi Minh and expanded by the media through radio and posters, “created a common identity and fellowship among different groups of Vietnamese people who shared goal of fighting for their motherland” (Khuat, Le & Nguyen, 2009, p. 59). Comparing the gender roles at this period with the previous time, many changes appeared. Although men were still more in a dominant position, the gap between males and females significantly reduced as women also became involved in the war. The symbol of masculinity in society was now a soldier. Compared with the feudal period, it still shadows the idea of a man loyal to his king and the country; however, it replaces the idea of the Confucian hierarchy and male total domination. Women were also given responsibilities in the war where they would get involved in a direct fight, production for the battlefield, producing for the family and still taking care of

a family, children and a house. Her virtues were now measured in waiting patiently and faithfully for the husband's return from the battle. At this time, women were encouraged to commit to the *Ba Khoan* (Three Delays) that meant: delay love if already in love, delay marriage and, if already married, delay having children. When the socialist ideology proved to be instrumental for mobilizing the Vietnamese society, it also reinforced the idea of sacrificing personal happiness for the cost of the common good and happiness. Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Communist Party, through early forms of media such as propaganda posters, war songs poems and fiction, newspapers, or radio reinforced all this ideology. Khuat, Le, and Nguyen (2009) explain:

During the war years, there was no love for the sake of love; rather, love was always bound to a revolutionary cause, always entwined with love for the country and for the socialist cause; love was glorified beyond the private realms where it belonged and thus almost became idolized and idealized. (p. 65)

Although it seemed like people's choices, especially in terms of personal relations and choices, were much more liberal, in reality there was still an intense struggle. The freedom that was provided was particularly strictly controlled and supervised by the "organization(s)." The "organizations" were basically organizations and institutions under the rule of the Communist Party that had the power to intervene in the personal lives of its staff and employees at a workplace, or members of the community when talking about the social institutions.

At this time, because of the American war, there was even bigger western influence comparing with the previous periods. If French left language, architecture, infrastructure and so on, Americans brought a lot of their lifestyles, mostly in the South

where they were settled, but with such intangible things, some trends also moved up to the North. With each trend that did not work with the principles and requirements of the Government, the Party would come up with a new rule and slogan or propaganda to combat it. For instance, Vietnamese youth quickly copied the fashion trends of bell-bottom jeans or long hair. To deal with that, the Vietnamese Government came up with the movement to “chop the bell- bottoms” and “cut off the long hair” (Khuat, Le, and Nguyen, 2009). When such simple choices like those of clothes and fashion were supervised, the more serious and personal preferences such as lifestyle, relationships, or love, applied even stricter rules. As mentioned above, the male and female roles had changed drastically, their relationships and what they were allowed to do were still heavily based on Confucian principles, especially one that clearly stated *Nam nữ thụ thụ bất thân*, which means that man and woman can not have physical contact.

Vietnam officially became independent on April 30, 1975. “The fall of Saigon” brought new opportunities for Vietnam’s political, economic and social evolution, which was mainly divided into the post-war reconstruction phase, and the reform and integration phase. In *Vietnam- a country study* (1989), the authors summarized well that Vietnam was portrayed as two districts and incongruent societies where

[t]he South was reported to continue to suffer from what communist consider neo-colonialist influences and feudal ideology of the United States while the North was considered to serve as a progressive environment for growing numbers of a new socialist human being, imbued with patriotism, proletarian internationalism, and social virtues. (p. 109)

The Government continued to establish a nation “of people, by people and for people” according to the Declaration of Independence from 1945. During this time, the most significant were Five Year Plans, which at each period aimed at different goals. As is commonly known, planning is a significant feature of centralized, communist economies, where the Central government establishes one common plan that is applied to all the regions regardless of variations in regional situations and circumstances. Before the unification, the government carried out the First Five Year Plan (1961-1965). It was only applied in the North due to War. This Five Year plan focused on implementing industrialization in the North, especially heavy industry, and large construction projects. At this point, the economic management that was applied more widely used centrally planned mechanisms to control policies. Basically, the goal of this Five Year plan was completed. It created the first step of the material and technical basis for the economic foundation of new production relations, in which the state owns and occupies the collective position. Yet because of the war, some targets were not achieved as originally planned. Even so, the achievements of the 1961-1965 Five-year plan were highly valuable for continuing to promote and guide the war against America toward triumph in 1975.

Not until 10 years later was Vietnam able to carry out The Second Five-Year Plan (1976-1980) where the planning process reflected a lot of positivism, but also impatience. The goals of this plan were set extremely high in the areas of industry, agriculture and Gross Domestic Product, while bearing in mind that 90% of the country’s economy was still purely based on agriculture. This stage was one of the most challenging for the country since its intent was multifarious: to finally lay to rest the persistent influence of

colonization by the west; to rebuild the country; to lay the foundations for new construction, while also attempting to integrate the North and the South, and to proceed with Communism. With such an ambitious plan, Vietnam was, unfortunately, incapable of reaching all of the goals; mainly due to lack of financial support for the already planned next phase of Second Five-Year plan from foreign countries. At that time, the foreign countries that would assist Vietnam were limited to the Soviet Union, China and Eastern European countries. Together with economic changes, Vietnam also implemented a family planning policy that is still widely known and currently applied. The new policy stressed having two children with 5 years of difference between them. As Khuat, Le, & Nguyen (2009) noticed, the policies at that time express the strong totalitarian tactics of the Vietnamese Communist Party. The media were also not an exception. As the Nhan Dan newspaper (1975) said, the 1976 Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam declared that the media of Socialist Republic of Vietnam must “thoroughly understand the goals and policies of the Party, constantly connect to the revolutionary realities, clarify the Party’s stand on topical issues, educate the public on patriotism, socialism, international communism, and provide the public with useful food for thought.”

However, due to the failure of the previous plan, the third Five Year Plan (1981-1985) constituted a compromise between ideological and pragmatic elements within the party leadership. The change needed to occur in order to overcome the problems that Vietnam was facing at this point: the economy was still dominated by small-scale production, low labor productivity, unemployment, material and technological shortfalls, and insufficient food and consumer goods. At this time, the plan’s highest priority was to

develop agriculture by integrating the collective and individual sectors into an overall system emphasizing intensive cultivation and crop specialization, and by employing science and technology. Despite that, the industrial sector was actually the one that got the most investment from the State. As a result, many small-scale industries were able to develop including food, textile and garment and a number of others. Developing those industries was a significant step for two reasons. Firstly, it created goods for export. Secondly, it laid the foundation for the development of heavy industries. This was a challenging yet extremely crucial step for the Vietnamese economy. From there, a particularly significant milestone was the year of 1986, and the following years that brought the significant shifts in the economy and society. The years between 1986 and 2000 are called the period of 15 years of renovation, starting with *Đổi mới* (Renovation) policy that was approved in December 1986 by the Communist Party Sixth National meeting.

The policy was aimed in three main directions. First, the economy transitioned from a single component owned economy to a more diverse one that included multiple forms of ownership to develop production and improve the efficiency of the economy. Second, economic activities shifted from direct State control through subsidy mechanisms, to a market economy with State management at the macro level, ensuring the autonomy of individual business enterprises. Third, the economy shifted from being heavily self-sufficient and self-supported, to being open to the outside world. In short, the policy represented a socialist-oriented market economy, where former centralized economy was combined with new free-market incentives. More importantly, at this time and stage of development Vietnam understood that for its own benefit it needed to open

the door to foreign investment, and to businesses from countries outside of the Communist cluster. Vietnam soon received financial aids from countries such as Japan and Sweden, and after negotiating for an end to the United States embargo and signing the normalization of diplomatic relationship, American companies and businesses opened their first headquarters in Vietnam. So did companies from other countries.

Together with financial capital, again foreign countries brought to Vietnam new cultural influences, ideas and perspectives. Although the changes in economic, political and social perception allowed for more diversity in the social outlook and perception, the “new” also brought along many social challenges. To name a few of the most relevant to the topic: a high rate of HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy and abortion starting in 2000s and, later, higher rates of separation and divorce.

Major characteristics of the culture

It is of undeniable importance to understand one country’s culture in order to lay fundamentals to the research topic. So why it is so crucial to understand the culture and what role it plays in acknowledging the real situation and challenges of the research topic? As Epstein (in Nguyen, 2007) suggests, the view on culture should be transcultural, meaning that culture is considered an “organic unit”- a system that is open, dynamic, and with the ability to overcome its own limits. Epstein’s look at culture focuses on the process of cultural interactions more than going in depth into only one aspect of it. This especially applies to understanding the culture in times of globalized world, and how the influences from outside affect and interact with already existing values. Because this research will focus on human relationships in the background of the whole social system in times of modernization, it is crucial to grasp Vietnamese culture

based on the brief history provided above, meanwhile scrutinizing it from a transcultural perspective.

Tradition, culture and values are certainly the principal components that shape people's perception on certain issues. As Martusewicz, Edmundson and Lupinacci (2011) stated, "culture, in this sense, is a very malleable and fluid set of meanings and relations. Created as people engage and interact and communicates with one another" (p. 51). This is especially true with respect to Vietnamese culture where society, besides the official constitution serves as rule maker in the communities. In many cases, the social recognition of family, friends and neighbors is more valuable than the written acts and policies in the different National Codes. Three major aspects of the culture this thesis focuses on are the role of the community, its influence on the lives of individuals based on their gender, and perception of happiness that equals getting married and having children. After all, the process of globalization and modernization is changing Vietnamese society and its traditional values.

Vietnam's cultural value system is a result of historical practices specific and unique to Vietnam. Vietnamese often mention the sense of community, patriotism, but one can argue that these values shape any nation in this world. Therefore, when analyzing Vietnamese culture, we look at important milestones in history to connect to the understanding of the meaning of the situations in Vietnam. To be more specific, when analyzing Vietnamese history and culture to aim at connecting it toward understanding, there are two aspects of this research topic: first is the media and its role in shaping people's perception; second is the situation and meaning of being an LGBT in that society. The transitions of Vietnam as a nation in the areas of integrating with regional

values, western culture, and in the general frame of globalization nowadays, without any doubts contributed to the creation, reproduction and modification of the values of a “queer” in Vietnam. At each historical stage, Vietnam was influenced differently; thus the reflection in the relationships also varies by historical time.

Although, in the previous parts, there appeared flashes of the culture and its changes along with a historical change, it is high time to examine relations and aspects of the culture that would allow readers to understand the further arguments and analysis related to sexuality and the LGBT community. One of the crucial aspects that need to be highlighted is the position of the male and female in Vietnamese family. Doing so will provide some of the tools to analyze the critique and the struggle of the LGBT community will be connected well.

Gender Roles. Originally, Vietnam was known as a matriarchal nation, and along with the almost 1000 year Chinese occupation, Vietnam was highly influenced by many values of Chinese culture. One of these was the system of patriarchy; therefore, there was a clear discrimination against women and power domination by men. In the book, *The second sex* (2011), de Beauvoir, explained that in a patriarchal society, men are equal to civilization, unified with history, and women are considered as “other” - always being dependent and are defined only in the context with a man. From here, we can easily imagine the gender roles assigned in a family. During the Feudalistic era, men in general, and if married - husbands were again put on the top of the social of family hierarchy, while women were always at its bottom. Since male children were perceived as most desirable, women had to keep giving birth until a son was born. Families had many children not only to assist with fieldwork and housework, but most often the family

wanted to ensure they would have son(s) to carry a family's name. Even to this day, the imbalance between male and female is still visible, shown clearly in national statistics. Additionally, with a development of science and technology, many couples are able to “control” the gender of a baby, or even decide to have an abortion if the baby is not the desired gender. According to the Vietnamese General Statistics Office, in 2011 the ratio between male and female babies nationally on average was 110/100, in some provinces such as Hung Yen reaching the dramatic ratio of 130.6/100. With a population of over 80 million people, the numbers would mean that 10-30% of adult men in the future might not be able to get married. Moreover, Vietnam is also struggling with female trafficking or, as it's officially described, the tendency of Vietnamese women to marry foreign husbands. On many websites, there are a number of Vietnamese women advertising themselves to get married to a foreigner. Many researches have been conducted on this topic, and without analyzing too deeply into it, some of the reasons are looking for a “better and brighter” future abroad, but many also claimed a hope of escaping from the patriarchal system of the society. Again, it can be clearly seen that the difference between male and female in Vietnam is troublesome.

The gender roles were present throughout the whole history. With its history of 1000 years of Chinese occupation, French colonization, and American influence, both males and females played crucial roles in protecting and reconstructing the country. In fact, at different periods the role of male and female in the family significantly changed. For instance, according to Nguyen (2012), Vietnam nation has always put high stress on education. Because of the war and challenges of each period of social, political and cultural development Vietnam had to go through, especially in the Feudal times, women

were not allowed to pursue education. On the contrary, as explained by Tran (2011), it was extremely critical for a man in the family to obtain education, and in order for a husband to be able to focus on education, a wife would need to fulfill her obligations, such as providing for the family, taking care of the house, and raising children. At that point, women's role was much appreciated. Common cultural sayings such as "Wife is in the first place, God is second," or "His order is not as necessary as her work" illustrate this. Through those two sayings, it is seen that the role of women was significant.

However, it was essential because she would serve her husband. Although the positions of male and female were different, yet their roles were strongly dependent on each other. The interdependence of men and women is shown by the two basic definitions of success in Vietnamese society: family and education/work. Therefore, without a wife and family, one would not be defined as successful because he would not have anyone to support his education and work.

If gender roles during feudal times were separate and men obviously dominated women, the next historic periods show them blending together somewhat. The war with France and the United States, again pushed men and women into different battlefields: men would go to the war while wives again had to care and supply whole family and provide for it. Women became mental and financial supporters of the family, even till today. Probably the most impactful toward changing gender roles in the Vietnamese society was the Renovation Policy in 1986. Together with changes discussed above, the most powerful one was the foreign influence and its impact on the society at that time. After 1990s, there were many foreign companies and businesses that hoped to recruit skillful and educated employees. This fact changed the traditional way of recruiting based

on connections and most of all gender roles in society. Employing based on the quality of work and personal abilities became widely spread regardless of gender. Therefore, male and female had the same chance of employment and position in the workplace.

Additionally, education also played a significant role in the changing roles and positions of men and women in the society. The literacy rate in Vietnam increased quite significantly. In 1999, the Vietnamese literacy rate was 90%, in 2009, the rate raised to 93.5%, with 95.8% and 91.5% of male and female rate respectively (Vietnam Statistics Office, 2009). Because of this considerably high literacy rate, more and more companies from abroad came to Vietnam. Not only working for the companies, Vietnamese women also started to participate in politics. Within Southeast Asia, Vietnam has one of the highest rates of women in the National Assembly (Vietnam Statistics Office, 2003).

The role of Vietnamese female in the society has changed with time and modernization. To include equal rights and a voice in economic and political questions, women have maintained their importance in the domestic context. Therefore, the amount of work that men and women share in family life is not equal. According to a United Nations analysis on Vietnamese women from 2004, Vietnamese women worked on average 13 hours per day, where men worked on average only 9 hours a day. This analysis explains that although man and woman share the same workload at the workplace, at home it is the women that do most of the housework. This is a perfect example of how tradition and modernization conflict in life and affect the lives of women. While modernization allows women to explore the outside and make decisions, the traditional values and mindset still tightens them to the kitchens of their houses.

Family and Marriage. All of the social relationships matter, but it is marriage that matters more than other relationships in Vietnamese culture. Marriage and weddings portray how happy an individual is. When it comes to marriage, parents had an absolute right and power to choose a bride/ groom for their children; and their children needed to be happy with their parents' choice. Unfortunately, this became a reason for many cases of immature marriage. Originating from not being able to make their personal choice, it also creates many negative relationships between parents and their children. People have always believed that marriage is to maintain the family name, face and existence. Marriage is considered not as a choice that affects only individuals, but as a choice that concerns the whole clan.

Therefore, the decision to get married lies with parents rather than children. It was each and everyone's obligation toward the ancestors and family to get married and give birth to next generations to maintain family name. One of the most unfortunate cases in one's life is an inability to have children. To meet this social demand, there are specific gendered roles in society. The marriage no longer only has social values, but also economic ones. To be able to create a family equals to the ability to be one of the healthy cells that have the whole society work well.

It can be seen that there existed many rules that limited people's choices. Parental guidance was a key to it. Regarding relationships, young boys and girls were not allowed to date. Vietnamese families were patriarchal, and roles in the family were clearly divided. Man was expected to earn for a living, while women would take care of the family. Despite divorce being legal, it was against social norms, therefore, even if unhappy, women were expected to carry on the family life and raise the children.

Modernization has brought changes to the long existing culture. Basically, everything in the society became more open. Younger couples were now allowed to date and learn about each other. The previously gendered roles in the family have also changed; women also have right to pursue further education and career.

Although nowadays the number of arranged marriages has significantly diminished and young couples have their own right to choose their bride and groom, the pressure for getting married has not declined. Society still heavily stresses that members contribute to social development. One of the ways to do this is through sexual reproduction. In fact, the ratio of married couples getting divorced, many of who claim the reason as being infertile, has increased drastically over recent years (Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism in a corporation with Department of Statistics, 2010).

Community. One of the most recent theories on culture by Hofstede (2001) uses a variety of factors such as power distance, individualism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation to analyze one's culture. Applying them to Vietnam, it was noted that hierarchal order is widely accepted by people despite the understanding that hierarchies within organizations are seen to reflect inherent inequalities. Nevertheless, centralization is popular, subordinates expect to be told what to do, and the ideal boss is a benevolent autocrat. Challenges to leadership are not well received. When looking at the collectivist/individualist score, Vietnam scored high in confirming its principle of belonging to the in groups such as family, villages, unions, organizations and bonds with them. Additionally, Vietnam is considered a long-term oriented culture, which means that it has the capability to adapt to transformation to the modern contexts. The modern context includes issues such as pragmatism, persistence

and hard work toward achieving goals meanwhile highly stressing on tradition and respecting the integrity. From this, it was unanimously concluded that Vietnam, like most Asian, African and South American countries, is highly collective, unlike North American and European countries that are highly individualistic. Additionally, Hall (1976) allows us to see Vietnamese culture as a high level context communication culture, meaning it stresses on emotions, instincts, senses, and tradition. The quite complicated relationships in Vietnamese culture originated mostly from Daoism and a Confucian influence. Four basic components that create this social relationship are allegiance to the family and country, reputation, love of learning and respect for others. One of the key values is love to learning. It is believed “every step we take, we learn a new thing” (Vietnamese proverb). Thus, again education is crucial in this society, although because of the history together with poverty, not all have an opportunity pursue it. As a result, people acknowledge the importance of education as well as they teach next generations about the proper behavior and mannerism. It is often said, “Knowledge does not matter as much as behavior” (Vietnamese proverb).

There is also a saying in Vietnam: “Village/Town goes along with the Nation”. For years, the two most prominent units in Vietnamese society have been the village/town and the Nation. With its historical background Vietnam was able to quite successfully go through a process of acculturation: maintaining its traditional values together with receiving the foreign influences. During 1000 years of occupation, China mostly influenced Vietnam with Daoism and Buddhism, which increased the community bond by creating kind, thoughtful and caring people, especially with a high patriotic love. During the next century, war with France and the United States only increased that

patriotism and love for the community, and strong beliefs in fighting for one another and this solidarity continue till the present. Always being in the same situation and facing similar challenges, Vietnamese always considered each other a “family.”

If during the war times, Vietnamese focused more on fighting for the homeland and caring for the country and family, nowadays, in times of peace, they can concentrate more on the well being and happiness of their own communities and families, not at all losing the strong collective bond. Not denying the importance of each individual, Vietnamese society, however, pays more attention to individuals collectively. In Vietnam particularly, all ancestors and family play a crucial role. In each family, there is a male who will carry the family name and who is responsible for all the rituals and celebrations of the family. The relationships in the clan are also based on different positions of grandparents, parents. Families and neighbors are still most significant, but also the most opinionated over some other’s life and personal choices. Despite community’s good intentions, the pressure that is created very often stresses an individual to act, behave, or make choices that go against his/her own desire and need. All in all, family is being kept at the center of one’s life. The most important thing that one can hold and fight for is a family reputation. A commonly known Vietnamese proverb states, “Better die than live with a bad reputation.” This also is a guide for the operations of the most families within communities. Besides keeping one’s reputation, it is crucial to practice respect to other people in the society, especially those older and in a higher social status and position. Therefore, it can be noticed that every individual needs to meet two requirements, keeping his or her own face, meanwhile respecting others. Just by stating so, it can be seen how serious social interaction and relationships are in Vietnamese culture. It is of

importance to understand that in many cases, the National Constitution would not matter as much as “people’s rules.” Therefore, every individual seeks for an acceptance from others and want to be a part of this collective society.

Chapter IV: Analysis and Discussion

The data gathered and examined for this thesis consists of comments posted on articles on online press, YouTube videos, Facebook posts and replies to some threads on the forums of the Vietnamese LGBT community. The responses can not establish the identity of the commentator, but there were two ways of language use that appear most often such as personal pronouns such as “we” (to represent themselves - the LGBT community) or “they” (to talk about them - the LGBT community). Another way was simply stating, “Although I am not gay or transgender” or “I am gay” and other. Regardless of being a member or non-member of the LGBT community, the responses showed quite similar themes. Moreover, unless the author of a comment does not specify him/herself, none of his/her demographics can be tracked down. Due to time limitations, the data analyzed trace back to the opinions on uploads and posts from 2005 and on. Also, it needs to be realized that because these are free to comment places, they will consist of both positive and negative attitudes, and commenters have a right to report or hide others’ comments they find offensive or inappropriate.

After analyzing the posts, three common themes emerged and are believed to partially represent public opinion on the LGBT issues and community in Vietnam. Among those comments, the negative ones are less frequent but are presented stridently. In regards to it, two significant themes were observed: lack of understanding, and prejudices that produce stigma as well as categorization and labeling. The positive perceptions were in a higher number and basically presented public support for LGBT equality.

Lack of understanding, Stereotyping and Prejudice

Weiss and Schiller (1988) wrote about period prior to Stonewall Riots and describe Lesbian and Gay (LG) culture of the early 1900s, which is believed to be when American homosexual community emerged. The authors said that before LG questions were recognized by society, LG people believed themselves to be isolated in their attraction to members of the same sex. It is true that not many of them knew that something that goes against the tradition and social values is still natural and should be considered normal. Although Weiss and Schiller discussed the United States in the 1990s, it seems similar attitudes prevailed in many countries. The article “Dismantling Assumptions: Interrogating “lesbian” Struggles for Identity and Survival in India and South Africa” by Amanda Swarr and Richa Nagar (2003) presented two cases in developing countries, which allow me to uncover similarities and commonalities in the queer across cultures. It seems reasonable to believe that queer people are more alike than different despite living in many different cultures. Although the general theory on the LGBT community is common in the world, the application of the general theory on the LGBT community in each culture is different because of the socioeconomic and cultural values.

However, the biggest commonality in experience of being queered similar is a dominant-oppressor relationship that, regardless of the region, exists everywhere. With a simple comparison on how it started in the United States, and cases in North America, India, and South America, I have realized that the instance is quite similar in all regions. The difference was the limitation on the resources and access to them that could support their existence. Moreover, social pressure and tradition created an extra burden for those

individuals, groups and relationship to come into the light. Because of the society that stresses gender roles so much, it seems impossible for Vietnam to have same sex relationships, or to have people behaving against stereotypical assigned gender roles. Probably the most crucial aspect was a marriage that was expected from both man and woman and their commitment to each other. Weiss and Schiller continue to emphasize “to not marry casts you as an outsider of the society” (p. 12). One online seems to understand it well:

Although I know it is not my fault, although I know it is normal, but why I feel so ashamed and guilty...I always had a loving family and all I was asked to do are create my own...but of course, how can I have one with her. Not only will I not able to have my own family, I will make my parents “lose their face.” But I cannot help it.

This is quite sad yet very common feeling of members of the LGBT community in Vietnam. Once they identify as LGBT, they put themselves in the minority group. In the past, they were believed to be at high risk of HIV; nowadays they still are at high risk, this time of social discrimination. The major reasons for this negative attitude are the pressure to keep respect and family’s face, contravention of tradition and established gender roles, and media that provide wrong information. Many negative opinions are created, calling homosexuality, bisexuality, or transgender: “the disease”, “trend”, “copying the Western” and “mainly affecting happiness of others”. Among comments on the video on YouTube or articles about the transgender community, we can see a lot of hatred. For instance *Lũ bệnh* (They are like disease), “Copy machines of west,” “Fake,” “Confused,” “Immoral” are word that are used to express the attitude toward the LGBT

community although in the previous part we have discussed that it was widely announced by the World Health Organization on January 1, 1993 that homosexuality was removed from its list of diseases. In the 10th revision of the WHO International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-10), "ego-dystonic sexual orientation" is listed under the heading of *psychological and behavioral disorders associated with sexual development and orientation*. The ICD-10 clearly states, "The sexual orientation alone is not to be regarded as a disorder." Additionally, Vietnamese law itself does not have any clear restrictions on homosexual acts and behavior. However, in cultures like Vietnam, the biggest judge is the society. So where does all this hatred come from? Although few in numbers, some comments give further explanations the negative attitude: "Well, too severe, anything that is not natural is never good. Society is more and more develop, though there are just values that becoming pulling it (the development) down." The defined progress in some people's minds is an economic change that Vietnam has been able to attain. Living conditions of citizens are clearly better but does the materialistic change also reflect a change in thinking and attitude? Not necessarily. "You are sick. Just accept how you were born. Having too much spare time or money watching the foreign shows and imitating them" is another comment gathered online. As Khuat, Le & Nguyen (2009) noticed:

The deep root of stereotypes and prejudices against homosexuality in Vietnam lies in the Vietnamese society's dichotomic view of the world. This view limits the word into a fixed order in which there are only two sexes, men and women, who function like two opposite poles that complement each other to create a natural balance. In this view, a stable society must be built from healthy families.

Which again are formed from a man and a woman. This view also considers the most significant purpose of sexual activities is to reproduce and preserve the human race. (p. 292)

Assigned gender roles “require” certain behavior from both male and female. Most commonly, the stereotypes indicate that lesbians are independent, not easily influenced, more stubborn, masculine, have short hair and so on. On the other hand, gay men are believed to have special/high interest in sex, to be emotional, neat, and feminine, and to take good care of their appearance (Herek, 2002). Without a doubt, physical appearance plays one of the most crucial parts of stereotyping queer members. Eliason et al. (1992) noticed the most common stereotype about lesbians is that they are “more likely to look and act like men” (p. 42). On the other hand, “lesbians who are more feminine in their appearance and behavior are less visible and thus do not contribute to the stereotype” (p. 49). Similarly, when it comes to homosexual males, the major belief is that they are feminine, thus violating acceptable male gender roles. Again, if a gay man can “keep” his masculinity it does not seem to be much noticed and objected. On the contrary, their beauty is highly appreciated. Comments toward “hot boys” or “hot girls” who came out as gay but still maintain the appearance of their assigned gender and are good looking are extremely friendly: “too handsome,” “so cute,” “too bad [s]he is gay.” In case of transgender, Gerhardstein and Anderson (2010) realized that female-to-male (FTM) and male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals that have gender-conflicting facial appearance were perceived as less attractive than transsexuals whose facial appearance was gender-appropriate. Again, when transsexuals are not “awkward,” “gross” or even “deformed” looking, the public opinion is quite supportive: “looking good,” “handsome,” “pretty,” or

“who would think this used to be a girl/boy.” This suggests that there is a strong desire for gender conformity among the public, and operation of a binary model of gender within the wider society, which results in policing and punishment of people who fail to conform (Whittle, Turner & Al-Alami, 2007 in Clarke, Hayfield and Huxley, 2012, p. 10). The physical appearance and comfort of others in the society is crucial to the LGBT community life. Among all the comments of the public, both negative and positive, the interesting point is that in personal life there seems to be the same level of denial toward queer, but on the professional level, more refusals happen to transgender population in comparison with other LGBT members. While generally higher numbers presented sympathy and understanding rather than hatred toward the LGBT community, when it comes specifically to LGB members and transgender, transgender suffers more negativity. The denial in personal life from friends and family, or loss of opportunities in the workforce, is an unremitting circle for the transgender community. Moreover, the less attractive, or less of stereotypical gender appearance standard one fulfills, the more challenging that circle is for her/him. Because of their “unusual” appearance, they are not able to find jobs that would allow them to gain two advantages: budget to undergo sex reassignment surgery and improve their look, and more importantly get respect from the family, friends and community to prove that they are not “lost and useless to the society.” However, with their different facial appearance and dressing style, it is of almost no possibility for them to obtain a job that would guarantee a stable income to obtain a goal of presenting themselves in the way they want plus pleasing the family and society.

The stereotyping of assigned roles originates from the high roots of tradition and a high pressure to maintain it. It is required from members of community to continue the

hierarchical system in a family, in groups and in the society, where men play the role of a bread makers and decision makers while women are home makers and more subdue to decisions of men. As we analyzed above, the circumstances have changed, and throughout Vietnamese history gender roles have significantly changed, and at many points there was no clear distinction between male and female work, there have always existed the difference in social power structure that male and female are assigned to. Hatred from the readers can originate from a personal perspective; nevertheless it cannot be denied that those personal perspectives originate the way social system works, based on its definition of socially normative attitudes. As Millham and Weinberef (1977) explain, the attack on homosexual and transgender or anyone who louts gender or sex norms is seen as a learned form of social control of deviance, rather than a defensive response to personal threat. Therefore, heterosexuality is not a personal value system; it is a tool in the maintenance of gender dichotomy. Green (1987) concluded, through highly emphasizing on heterosexism, “any male who refuses to accept the dominant culture’s assignment of appropriate masculine behavior is labeled early on as a ‘sissy’ or ‘fag’ and then subjected to bullying” (Herek, 1998, p. 7). The author continues, “[s]imilarly, any women who oppose male dominance and control can be labeled a lesbian and attacked (Pharr; 1988)” (Herek, 1998, p. 8). The comments represent the necessity for some people for a clear distinction between two and only two genders: “Not a girl, not a boy. What do you call yourself? Crazy. Or Sick,” is a good example of this outlook, but the following comment further elucidates how the hierarchical gender roles are necessary:

Your family waited for so long, wanted a baby boy, raised and care about you.

They want someone to carry a family name. They needed a son. Or you chickened

out and want to escape from your obligation? This is how you pay back to your parents for raising you and caring about you? You have no heart.

Vietnamese society, undergoing modernization, is doubly challenged. At the first level, they need to understand that with a more open economy, more opportunities and change in the society, there should not exist any assigned gender roles like in the past. At the second level, in overcoming those assumptions about gender roles, it needs to be understood that definition of a gender occurs on different levels that not necessarily reflect how tradition has been describing it. When society is able to redefine the term “normal,” we will not see comments such as this anymore:

I believe that, human was born only under 2 genders: male and female. If anyone have no reproductive ability or have some illness regarding to sex, then it is an illness, means it can be treated or not. In general, I simply think that whatever is abnormal is of a concern.

Another very important aspect of Vietnamese culture is marriage. It can be said that for an adult, marriage represents success and happiness of not only that particular individual, but for the entire family and clan. It is required to give themselves and their parents’ happiness; moreover, they need to be a part of a social reproductive system. One commentator expressed it this way:

Obviously, homosexuals have their rights for equality; they need to be allowed to get married. However, we need to look at the issue more deeply. Let’s put the tradition and values aside for a while, and talk about what is actually going on. If we allow same sex marriage it would create chaos in reproduction and the future population.

With regard to this issue, Ahmed (2010), explains marriage as one of those points in life that everyone is required to reach:

For a life to count as a good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the directions promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. (p. 4)

The haters, therefore challenge the queer community to have a good explanation of how they plan to fulfill their responsibilities toward their families, community and society:

[...] If they can become mothers, will they be able to truly understand and feel the precious moments of the motherhood? Because if not, then what kind (of gender) is she? Why they need to make this life more complicated?

Or another comment:

Looks like a man, how do you plan on having children? Does one of the partners need to sacrifice and undergo a (gender) operation? When so they will be called a sissy. And what about making a real family?

It is the steadfastly androcentric and hierarchal system of Vietnamese society, where under modernization, people have been given more chances and autonomy, the decisions had to be made based on the core of the value system. Love (2007), stresses on how it is important for queers especially to have a sense of validation. In Vietnam, due to high collective factor in the culture, acceptance from one's family and culture is even higher and more needed for one's self esteem and approval. The culture and even political system made its people believed that, in Ahmed's words (2010), we became the object in the world which "promise happiness is passed around, accumulating positive affective values as social goods" (p. 4). An example provided is making a happy family. The

family might be happy not because it causes happiness, or not even because it affects anyone in a positive way that promises happiness, rather sharing orientation toward family as being good, “what promises happiness in return for loyalty” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 4). This is also a reason why social bonds are good enforcers as well as outcomes of living based on what is socially believed to be good. And sadly, society and all its components are strong enough to convince people from minority groups that if they do want to be a part of that the system, they need to follow what is normal and satisfy the standard. Unpleasant and even offensive feelings cause the LGBT community members to hide their feelings not only from family and friends, but also most sadly from themselves. Thinking that “homosexuality is unnatural, unhealthy and a dangerous moral threat to society” (Weiss & Schiller, 1988, p. 16) might even been misunderstood within some of the LGBT individuals at some point.

As mentioned above, besides law, society is actually one of the biggest judges in everyday life. Therefore, although the Vietnamese government does not approve, some younger couples did organize a wedding for the family and society. Since the very first same-sex wedding organized in 1997, several more have been announced to the public in recent years. In response to articles and video clips regarding those weddings, some replies were not favorable toward them despite the fact that those couples tried to fulfill their social responsibility; the comments do not seem to show any more sympathy: “If you are homosexual, should just be quiet and live your life. Why do you try to get attention and organize a wedding? Just be quiet. All this chaos is just unacceptable.” Others take their condemnation even further by asserting that homosexuality or transgender negatively affects others’ lives:

You two crazy people, you get married then will for sure separate. You lesbians just come together to have sex. When you get fed up with sex, you will break up without any hesitation. It is truly sad for your family that they raised you till now and you are making them lose their face till the end of their life. You are the trash of society. You really affect future generations.

In the society that is so dependent on role modeling, the fear that others will follow this example is extreme. This fear originates from the fact that people lack understanding on this issue, but again the collectivism is so strong, it must become everyone's common matter. As a result, everyone has to be normal and follow a uniform standard. However how do they convince those who cannot be? For instance, heterosexual couples that are not able to have kids? Are those people automatically assumed to be unhappy their whole lives? Societies should really care enough about each individual or, on the other hand, just not care at all, and let people make their own decisions. What is happiness? Is it happiness if you achieve someone else's idea of good, for their benefit? This question will be answered in the following parts of this thesis, where there is surprisingly big change in public perception. However, before that there is another large theme that collected comments present: labeling and categorization.

The third world

Besides continued negative comments related to culture and tradition, there appeared another significant reason for such controversial opinions or maybe, to be more precise, comments that express confusion among terms of *Lesbian*, *Gay*, *Bisexual*, and *Transgender*. The confusion, but also discrimination, is mostly expressed through the language used in the comments. Although the commentators are the ones who are

missing the knowledge about the LGBT community, their opinion transfers all the “bad” and “blame” on the LGBT members.

The possible confusion among the terms is confusion about gender identity and sexual orientation. And although the thesis will not analyze in details the difference, it is crucial to basically distinguish among those concepts. Khuat, Le, and Nguyen (2009) explain gender identity as personal feelings and association including “his/her characteristics, values, and relationships as a man, a woman or a different gender” (p. 258). This identification is traditionally based on biological features; however, nowadays it is also identified by other factor such as behavior or physical appearance. Therefore, people who associate themselves with a different gender than their biologically assigned sex are transgender. It needs to be also noted that gender identity does not specify sexual orientation. Therefore, sexual orientation is sexual or romantic attraction of one. As a sexual orientation, homosexuality is that attraction toward another person of a same sex; bisexuality is the attraction to both male and female. With this difference, a transgender person can be heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual. On the other hand, homosexual or bisexual defined their sexual orientation based on their gender. Although the difference appears quite simple, it does not seem to be understood by many commentators on social media. One common term used for all LGBT community is “The Third World.” This term is not strange to Vietnam. Based on economic status as well as development, Vietnam has been categorized as a Third World country. The term “The Third World” in regard to both LGBT community and economic growth are literally translated in the same way. Nowadays, the term appears again, used to define “the others” of the society, all put together without a distinction of gender identity or sexual orientation.

Thus, by economic definition of third world, meaning less developed and progressive, we also assume that the term “Third World” regarding the LGBT community is also less progressive and worse than heterosexuals or those who evince the gender identity into which they were born. The commentators cannot distinguish between L-G-B-T, but they clearly know that they are worse. In response to a YouTube video on transgender, one commenter says:

Homosexuality or heterosexuality is not a gender, but sexual orientation, but trans are the bizarre, phony ones, so unnatural we cannot put them into any category.

Or how to say it, I do not care about you. Third world is stupid world.

More than that, the opinions express negative attitude and suggest that the LGBT community is worse and affecting society.

Do you have too much of the spare time and nothing to do? You do whatever you want, but no matter what you do, you will never be normal or any of us.

Everything that is natural is the best. All those third world. Just crazy, trashy making the chaos in the society. Just go back to your hidden life. Go back to the closet.

Although Vietnam has reached certain levels of economic progress, there are still many limitations in people’s lives, and their values became an object. Their relationships and emotions are cut down to the norms. The question here, however, is who decides what is a norm and why it is incontrovertible that the mainstream is superior? Foucault (1990) argues, “Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administrated” (p. 24) as now sex needed to be inserted into the system of the unity.

As mentioned above, norms that are shaping the current societies do not encourage the existence of the “other.” Queer culture for sure fits well into the category of the other. Because it is different, it threatens those who are considered normal. But the question is what is normal and who defines it? What power does it take to name one normal? The standards of “normal” were established in times past, but it was the dualistic thinking that allowed it to exist until today. The materialist world that turned the world into objects and promoted system based on numbers has shaped the minds of generations to believe in the separation of existence of humans in the world. Societies are being transformed into numbers, and it is those digits that manipulate our brains. Simply, as happens with commodification, everything is converted into a price. Moreover, with the increase of production and promotion of consumption, the price is determinant of the social values. Along with that, the quantity rather than quality is given a credit of achievements. People’s social status is determined by what they’re able to buy. Sadly, it has become a competition to the standard set by the ones not necessarily in the running. This case applies to social institutions and individuals. Moreover, the digits that influence the perceptions of the people in the modern world also include media and technology. They are a powerful means of maintaining the citizens on behalf of those with the highest interest for the society to “develop” in a certain way. Operating under control for the individualistic benefit of a group, they have all become a successful mean of domination. Therefore, the minorities and the groups that are categorized as different (mostly those who are not within the privileged ones) face many challenges in being identified and being able to express themselves.

The arguments above lead to a question of why there is a fear of the queer culture to reach within the so-called normal and possibly also becoming a mainstream. How could allowing sexuality to be free be “harming” the society? The answer might be the understanding about sex and sexuality as we defined at the very beginning. We understand that sex, and here I mean erotic, is more than just sexual activity, as sexual intercourse, expression of sexuality through similar activities. Sex and sexuality represent relationships that exist among humans, their connection and understanding. Erotic itself is a “resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane [...] meant suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives” (Lorde, 1984, p. 53). Lorde continues by telling us that the fear is that women who know their power and are empowered are dangerous; therefore we are taught to separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of our lives other than sex. Especially for a society like Vietnam, where political power has only been in one Party and socially is still facing gender inequality, sexuality and queer culture threatens the power of the dominant culture. Those others were made to hide, not express themselves, but actually that fact creates the fear of unknown to the privileged ones. The power of the oppressed lies in the fact that they are willing and capable of feeling and creating new relationships. They are able to get together and assert a power of listening; they are able to go out of the box. The assigned roles, especially those related to gender, no longer exist. The freedom of choosing your own identity, role, and place in the society jeopardize the system ruled by the dominant ones.

Lalich (1996) shared a view of the way domination of other sexualities becomes a mechanism to restrict one’s freedom, govern other view on one’s freedom, and expand

the government and dominant culture's rule. Those ways include reproductive and general sexual controls. Although the first law in Vietnam Hong Duc (1428-1787, Le dynasty) Law and Gia Long (1802-1945, Nguyen dynasty) listed the following as crimes: rape, sexual abuse, having an affair, incest; therefore, not mentioning homosexuality or bisexuality as a crime. On the contrary, men who dress like women, or castrate themselves or others are considered breaking the law. The current government also used its power by banning same sex marriage in the law; same sex marriage is among 5 prohibited marriages (the others include marriage to persons who are already married, to people who lost civil behavior abilities, to people of the same blood to the 3rd generation, or marriage among adopted and biological families) (Law on Family and Marriage from 2000, chapter II, Article 10). From the point of view of the society and culture, homosexuals, bisexuals, as well as transgender people are isolated and abandoned by the community.

Even though they are acknowledged to be in the society, they are put into boxes and categories so that they can fit the way the system works, and they are easier to control. Humans became objects as Butler (1994) explains; sex became a fully social category where cultures of labeling have increased its chances to be more common and widespread. Thus, the labeling is how the dominant culture let it fit into the society.

Advocacy for equality

The world has been operating in such a way for as long as anyone can remember. The creation and then recreation of the tools and systems of domination have continued for centuries. In my opinion, the means and methods have not changed but transformed into a different way of controlling. Therefore, it is still the reproduction of the violent

relationships in the society. The true modification would be the opposite of what exists and is being continuously maintained – stop the superior – inferior relationship and instead create the societies based on mutual understanding and partnership.

Therefore, despite the number of negative comments, the majority of the public opinion regarding the issue represents a lot of support and advocacy for equal rights. In response to many of the articles and video clips on issues of the LGBT community, many reactions, although very short and simple, represent sympathy toward this new issue. It can be noted that around 70% of the comments said: “ I support,” “ They have the right to do that,” “They have a right to be themselves,” “I like,” “This is good.” The change in opinions toward the queer community can be noted mainly in response to two types of media representation. The first kinds are videos on homosexuals, bisexuals and transgender aiming at providing more information and knowledge to the audience. The second types are the videos and posts calling for stopping the discrimination against and stigmatization of the LGBT community. Although in both cases, there are partially representing different attitudes, the majority of the responses show that the goal of that video or article is met. In the media that provide more information, many replies indicate that hatred originated from lack of knowledge and the audience appreciate the information that was provided: “I did not know,” “It is interesting to read about them and finally understand who are they,” “Now I know who transgender really are” and many more similar responses. Although many LGBT community members still live in isolation, fear of coming out, and social denial, the modernization and globalization that brought economic prosperity and access to information and education, has contributed to more understanding of this issue. Just from some basic examples above, it was noticed

that using media and being able to access the knowledge about this emerging matter already is a leading step in social recognition and acceptance that is especially critical in the collective society such as Vietnam. It not only opened the mind of the public, but also among the LGBT community itself, the openness about this topic allowed many LGBT community members to feel more supportive and encouraging. Many of them found the social media a place to make friends and express what they could not before:

It is difficult to come out, and I don't think I can yet, but it is good to have a place to express yourself, and most importantly to now you are not wrong. I always thought there is something wrong with me, but no. I am not the only one. I have my community here.

Not only did the globalization and modernization open the minds for many, it also allowed the LGBT community people, especially transgender people, to find more work opportunities. There are many more opportunities for self-employment, and also there are jobs on the market that would not require one's physical presence, or are more open-minded in their definition of beauty, such as beauty salons, fashion shops, or the entertainment industry. There are many reported cases of transgender "selling their body" at parties or privately, however, this kind of "employment" applies to many other non-LGBT people as well. Most of the commenters concluded they are also humans, and have all the rights that each individual is eligible for. The replies on the social media are strong supporters of LGBT members: "There are 600 mammals and animals in this world that are homosexuals, but only humans stigmatize themselves." Many others call for respect and kindness toward LGBT people: "Even if you are gay or lesbian you are also a human,

need to be respected, only people without a conscience, doing evil things, harming others, and especially do not know how to respect others are critical people.”

More importantly, the previous perception of who the LGBT community members are, and how they were presented is at this point much more clearer. Despite the comments of those who consider homosexuality, bisexuality, or transgender to be sick, many have overcome the idea of it being a social evil and negatively affecting the society.

I think, as long as you are from the Earth there should not be any discrimination except for those who steal, kill, those I don't want to mention. But when it comes to gender, and sexual orientation it's something natural, it's because of your physiology, nobody wanted or forced it. Who wanted to change anything like that on purpose? (Original post in English)

The audience advocates for this minority group to be considered “normal” and treated equally, as all other members of the community. However, not because they are minority, should there be any pity on them or should they be under or over privileged. One of the commenters says: “We need to be fairer so that they can have their human rights. They will decide for themselves, and if they make any mistake they will face the Court just like others.” This is believed to represent the strong community ties that Vietnamese society is known for.

With the issue that is just emerging, there is probably no possibility to be widely adopted by society all at once, however, what is called for at this moment is the acceptance by the society, which seems successful if it is based on the current public

opinion on social media. Despite some negative comments or confusion on LGBT issues such as “How do they have kids then?” There are immediate responses like:

Do you think that two people loving each other are only to have kids? If they want, they can adopt. Comparing with others that cohabit and then have an abortion or give birth and leave their kids in the orphanages, I don't think that the issue of the same sex couple not having kids is that important.

The previous chapters analyzed the history and culture of Vietnam that needs to be used to show that the solidarity and strong social bonds have not changed despite the times and circumstances. Although there is lack of knowledge, there is still much support for minorities and the “different” as a part of the society. People are always willing to stand up for each other and express that nobody should be left behind if they are good at heart regardless of their sexual orientation or gender:

We are all Vietnamese, born and raise in the same way. But everybody is also different. Different does not mean bad. We went through worse things in the past; do we really still want to go through bad again? Why hurt our own people?

Or another comment:

They were just born like that, so what saying do we have in it? We do not have any right to judge others because they all have the right to their own private life.

They should have their own freedom. Just like the freedom we all fought for.

More than that, the LGBT community and related issues has become an inspiration for many Vietnamese people. Being familiar with an idea of role modeling, many express their admiration and respect when homosexuals or bisexuals come out and transgender “live their real life.” Articles and videos about LGBT members who were able to

overcome the fear of the public inspired many respondents: “ I admire you,” “ I want to be able to do what you did,” “ I want to be able to live my real life” or “I admire you... cause you are being whom you are...because you can love who you want and stand up for your love.... wish you happiness.” Even for those outside of the LGBT community, the ability to overcome traditional conservative views discouraging the “abnormal” is a kind of awakening:

I am not gay, but I do not think I always fit to the society. I do not know what I want. I feel like I am different. This encourages me to live, to believe in myself. I want to live and be true to myself. I want to be able to not fake who I am not.

Or to an even deeper extent, this is a “revolution” of a mind toward old-fashioned thinking that LGBT community will be “created” once society progresses. This is partially true. As we suggested before, the fact that Vietnamese society had its socio-economic development to some extent contributed to realizing the truth about always existing LGBT community. Therefore, going to the roots of history and looking at how Vietnamese society has always been familiar with the images of people of the same gender together, or familiarity with an everyday language to express concepts on homosexuality or transgender, is an actual revolution. It is not making LGBT members into a “new trend,” or making them the new “others” of the society, but it is believing in them always being a part of Vietnamese strong society:

I wish our Vietnam not to treat transgender people badly because nobody wants to be born in those circumstances (wanting to be different from their biological gender). I feel truly bad for them. Despite your religion, ethnicity please spread your arms alike Bodhisattvas living to help others, help them overcome difficult

times. Many of them are already struggling with their own identity, why to add more? Let us all Vietnamese community not stigmatizes them, hate them, but support them to integrate with other people.

International and domestic scholars suggested that Vietnam needs to have more understanding view on LGBT people where there is sharing and acceptance of them. It becomes a challenge regarding more legal matters such as marriage. Although there has never been a legal marriage in Vietnam, some couples did get married for social acceptance and permission to live together such as weddings in 1997 in Ho Chi Minh City, 1998 in Vinh Long, 2011 in Hanoi 2012 in Ha Tien, Ca Mau, Binh Duong etc. On the other hand, there were also cases where the same-sex relationship would break and cause the same problems when separating and divorcing straight couples. However, it is those one or two minor cases that society looks at and judges, whereas cases that are really troublesome by the “normal” is forgotten in this argument. Therefore, many advocate for same sex marriage in Vietnam. It has been formally mentioned by Justice Minister Ha Hung Cuong said Jul 24, 2012 as we quoted above and has been widely supported by the online public: “Marriage is one of the happiest things in human’s life, something that everyone wish to have and are proud when they have it. What is the reason to affect other happiness and what is our right in deciding others?”

Another supporter comments:

I want equality, I want my Vietnam to become a place where every single person is valued, and every single person is given the same opportunity to create his or her happiness. I want my gay friends, who are not able to be whom they are to be treated equally with me - a straight person. We are all human, we are all raised in

the same environment, and we go to the same school. There is no reason why I can be whom I am, but he or her cannot! Therefore, I'd like same-sex marriage to be legalized in Vietnam! (Original post in English)

An additional issue, which seems more challenging, is to allow transgender to legally change their gender on all the documents and be recognized as a gender they identify with. This has been a difficult issue for Vietnamese who underwent sex reassignment surgery or even for those who did not but identify as the other gender. For instance, in 2005 in Binh Phuoc province, there was one case of male-to-female who was allowed to change all the documents into her new name and gender. The change was made, at the local level and after this case was given permission, it brought to the province many other transgender who longed for so long to be recognized with their real identity to “finally have their dream come true.” This was initially great news for the transgender community, but not for too long. Because too many transgender people came asking for the change, the only province to pass the documents stopped accepting the documents for the gender identity change, leaving all hopefuls again hopeless. The case of the first one was again sent to “processing” pile despite it having already been approved. Without legally being recognized, there are many disadvantages. Similarly, to homosexuals and bisexuals, they cannot formally get married and adopt kids. However, being transgender carries even bigger difficulty in not really having any documentation representing their real identity, especially if they have undergone the surgery. As long as they do not have their legal document with a change, they are not legally present, cannot own big possessions, register for formal means of education, employment, travel etc. with a new identity. Therefore, it is crucial not only to legalize same sex marriage, but also approve a

law on identity change for transgender in order for them to function in society. If the Communist Party actually wants its citizens to be able to contribute and build a society toward socialism, the first step is it needs to recognize and legalize transgender people so that they can legally work and contribute to the social development.

It is now understood how much importance lies within the public to advocate for the Vietnamese LGBT community. They contribute to change in the lives of minorities, the perception and better understanding of the public, and in general better social functioning. Moreover, those sharing and commenting on the social media became a part of criticizing not only Vietnamese culture, but more than that the homophobic views that control and deny this minority group. Comments and replies on social media became a voice against stereotyping, stigma, and lack of knowledge, antipathy, and ignorance toward the LGBT community. The public on social media is calling for an end to stereotyping, where male and female need to appear in a certain way, even as a LGBT member needs to follow the “butch,” “dyke,” “fem,” “fag,” “faggot,” “drag,” style. Or just stopping to use the language to refer to LGBT community members:

[...] such words are used so often. Homophobia is plainly ignorant and disgusting; homophobic language is hurtful and humiliating, even if you don't certainly mean it like that. God, I really hope that no one will use it in front of me, or else they will be dead meat. I loathe homophobic peasants.

(Original post in English; The term “peasant” here does not indicate any social class issue. The term is used as a slang in Vietnamese to describe less educated, less experienced group of people).

If Vietnam keeps pushing people to satisfy double standards to define good and bad member of society and citizen, then it should purely base its standard on people's personality and contribution to society. The community should assess people on their personality and how good of a family and community member they are. From the communist country perspective, people should be judged according to their achievements, work, and contributions. As a result, as long as they meet the requirements of the society and the Government, there should not be any discrimination toward them. One comment summarized it quite well:

For such a long time, they have still lived here, studied, worked and contributed to the nation. They did what was asked for. They are as other people. Working and contributing. Making the society more prosperous. Obeying the law. But why their happiness is never considered?

Whereas there has been so much debate on law on the LGBT community assuming that they are the "law breakers," there is no clear punishment for the ones expressing the hatred and negativity toward them. Consequently, the law and rules against homophobia is being created by the public:

Duh, I have never bothered trying to figure out my sexuality because I shall be proud of whom I am no matter what. I want be a LGBT activist and a feminist in the future, and I remind myself to chase my dream every single day. But the thing is that, it's nagging and frustrating to go to school and be surrounded by idiots all day. Kids, it isn't fun to make jokes about rape or gay people or self-harm because this kind of things never means that you're cool and humorous as a "shit starter" or such, it means that you're disrespectful, insulting, offensive, immature and

moronic, and I refuse to associate myself with such homophobic peasants. The others are not so much better, either. If you only care about gay men because they're hot and cute and sexy together, because of that matter on who bottoms and who tops, not because you care about the fight for equality and for others' rights, you're not an activist, so stop declaring to be one. That's just as degrading and demeaning, and I also refuse to associate myself with people like that.

Maybe it's one of the reasons why I'm always grumpy and friendless, but this is what I would rather be. I weep for humanity, good Lord. (Original post in English)

In my opinion, the advocacy here should aim at not distinguishing and naming proper objects (Butler, 1994), rather, we acknowledge the differences and not promote to the unification because queer culture will always have boundaries to push. It is crucial to understand that normal and good have different meanings and do not correlate and what is “abnormal” is not necessarily bad. Therefore, let’s have queer culture exist and develop on its own, bring us more and new forms of sexual identities, and cultural identities. Let’s have a real dialogue, mutual respect and even affinity between gay groups and gay leaders, suggests Lisa Dugan (2002). Ideas that are not expressed become painful and deformed; this is the way that the system wants others to be in order to control it. Thus, heteronormativity needs to be challenged by having a room for criticism in sexual discussion around sexual issues combined with other attributes such as gender, ethnicity or class. And from there let the Vietnamese nation really apply the Article 3 of the Vietnamese Constitution from 1992:

The State ensures and constantly fosters the people's rights as masters in all spheres, realizes the targets of building a prosperous life for its people, a strong country and an equitable, democratic and civilized society, ensuring the well-being, freedom and happiness of all citizens as well as conditions for their all round development, and severely punishes all infringements on the interests of the nation and of the people.

Chapter V: Conclusion and Suggestions

“Society is an integrated system of social structures and functions.”

Talcot Parsons

As stated above, society was created and is shaped by neither an individual nor by a single institution. It is a social system in which the existence of individuals and individual issues are integrated and depend upon each other. The debate about whether society or an individual in it is more valuable is as a dilemma of “which came first, a chicken or an egg.” As C.W. Mills stated, “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both” (2000, p. 3). Looking at the existing societies, however, what can be noticed is a struggle in existence, rather than peace and prosperity. One of the most key aspects of it is the lack of understanding that we people are all connected in the society, and every action of ours influences others.

Misunderstanding of the relationships that inform the world nowadays, leads efforts to dominate each other, especially those existing in the “others” box. A challenge that we face is the challenge of the deep assumptions to recognize the hierarchical system shaping the societies. Those assumptions have historical roots. As in his famous essay, “What is Enlightenment?” French philosopher Michel Foucault (1990) concludes, “...the critique of what we are at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” (p. 50). Many of the authors and activists were able to undertake a historical analysis of what, and who we are, teaching us that the current inequalities and discourses are rooted in the systems shaped and created by the societies. Many values and traditions have changed as society “progresses,” however the question is whether the changes are a true

“progression” or in fact, it is the development of and for only one group of the society that is privileged to define it. Similarly, the issue of sex and sexuality has changed its definition and meaning along with the changes of the society; it is still debatable whether the changes made a difference.

Another reason that promotes the continuity and growth of those discourses is media. As Button, Rienzo and Wald (1997) stated “the media is no doubt one of the most powerful institutions in our society in influencing public sentiment on significant social issues” therefore it “contributes to the political opportunity structure” (p. 96). The issue on the LGBT community in Vietnam nowadays is mostly represented through media, both official channels as well as social media created by public. Media allows not only the public to get educated about the LGBT community issues; it is also a way for the LGBT community members to be true to themselves and understand that different does not mean wrong. Through the availability and easy access to the searching tools, media provides the LGBT as well as its allies an opportunity to come together as a community. The issue of LGBT is no longer in the closet, but media aroused public concern, and from there it creates a movement toward its rights.

Truly, the emerging issue of the LGBT community in Vietnam has also gone through changes together with “social progress,” however in the case of Vietnam there were similarities and differences to the common steps of the global LGBT rise. Comparing with books by Weiss & Schiller, Gilreath or Hall as well as articles by Swarr & Nagar, it can be seen that despite time and place, the existence of the LGBT community is globally widespread, and all the stories begin similarly in the aspect of the challenge to come out to existence to the society. Social progress and development

somehow allowed the process of coming out to be easier by creating supportive groups for the LGBT community, as well as educating the public on the issue. The difference laid in the level of progress and the cultural structure of each region. While in America where generally the public is more open about sex and sexuality, and stresses less on binary roles of male and female, the LGBT community can respond to attacks with less difficulty. As Wilchins (2004) mentioned, “Gay right activists have responded to conservative’s attacks by stressing the normality of homosexuals: “We are just like straight people. We just sleep with the same sex” (p. 17) and this way has been particularly successful. Also because of earlier and faster development of the economy and media, the U.S. is one of the pioneers for LGBT movements. However, it needs to be noticed that there is also extreme hatred and violence toward the LGBT community in the United States (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2011). When analyzing the Vietnamese LGBT community, it appears as if Vietnam’s “history of homosexuality is quite smooth” (Khuat, Le & Nguyen, 2009, p. 305). Although two among three themes analyzed seem to have more of a negative attitude, it was again not fully severely discriminatory, and mostly originated from lack of knowledge due to limited access to information, poor education, or simple ignorance. Khuat, Le & Nguyen (2009) agreed by stating “[E]ven though homosexual people might have experienced personal tragedy or losses of opportunities, at least they are not subjected to severe discrimination as is the case in some other countries” (p. 305).

On the contrary, we try to advocate for no denial or discrimination at any level, which was clearly presented in the third theme of the thesis. It represented a strong solidarity and support for the LGBT minority as a part of the society. Furthermore, the

positive attitude also represented a call for support for the different and “abnormal.” Vietnamese LGBT issue although still emerging, already becomes a global movement against homophobia and advocacy for equal rights for LGBT members. The possible challenges for the Vietnamese emerging LGBT community are the newness of the issue to the society, which may lead to lack of social understanding from the public, as well as lack of experience to advocate for LGBT community and allies. The greater barricade to equality and acceptance for the LGBT community in Vietnam is tradition and culture, with its high stress on gender roles and family values. It is of a challenge, but it does not mean it is impossible. Just in two decades of the issue’s existence in public and around 5 years of real discourse, the public perception has drastically shifted. The worse misunderstanding of homosexuality being a disease, social evil, crime is already overcome, the next step will aim at accepting them they way they are in the society and believing in their doing good. Maybe it is too early to advocate for marriage equality since in many other countries where the issue has existed for much longer advocates are still struggling with it. However, it is necessary to call for public acceptance and equal existence of LGBT members in the society. Culturally and historically Vietnam seem to have many experiences in doing so. Vietnam is a nation known for determination in fighting for liberation, culture strong in supporting each other in the community with Confucius values and tradition of practice a way to the true happiness by understanding injustices and inequalities with Buddhist philosophy.

Therefore, I examine the existence and struggle of the group that questions and does not rationalize the “normal”, and I suggest Buddhism Enlightenment as a solution for the issue at the social level because at one point, any individual would ask a question

of “What is the purpose in life?” Although Buddhism Enlightenment (Zen Enlightenment) had its roots in the sixth century it applies greatly to the challenges the modern world is facing.

Queer and Buddhism

Basic principles of Buddhism. Buddhism to many appears more than a religion; rather it is a philosophy that will lead us to enlightenment for our own happiness. Therefore, the Buddhist path can be understood as to lead a moral life, to be mindful and aware of one's thoughts and actions, and to develop wisdom and understanding. Looking at current societies, it can be clearly stated that we were not yet able to reach them. The lack of listening and understanding between so called “us” and “others” creates the conflict and discrimination. What is defined “moral” for other, but do not fit the “normal” automatically becomes immoral, thus unacceptable and marginalized.

Buddhism and Sexuality. Although there is no specific teaching in Buddhism regarding homosexuality, bisexuality or transgender, Buddhist followers do know the principles on sex that should be followed. Buddhist monks are expected to live in abstinence from any type of sex. On the contrary, there is no rule prohibiting those with homosexual orientation from joining a monks' life. For the lay Buddhists, the principle is to follow the Five Precepts, some of which do mention sex. For instance, the Third Precept states “not to engage in sexual misconduct” that can be defined in many different ways. Above all Buddhism defines as moral is based on principles such as the *Universality* principle, How would I like it if someone did this to me?; *Consequences* - Does the act cause harm and regret (in oneself or others) or benefit and joy?; *Utilitarian* principle - Will the act help or harm the attainment of goals (ultimately spiritual

liberation)?; *Intention* - Is the act motivated by love, generosity and understanding? Therefore, sexual misconduct can be defined more as including coercive sex, sexual harassments, and molestation. When the relationship is defined by society between two people where love, respect and loyalty is expressed in a sexual act, it is not breaking the principles mentioned above. It also does not include any distinction between heterosexual and homosexual. To conclude this part, it can be understood that Buddhism does not encourage homosexuality, however, its teaching does not prohibit or discriminate anyone who practice such acts as long as its intentions are pure.

Buddhism and Queer theory. From the basic understanding of Buddhism and of what principles of sexuality it consists, I established a linkage between this philosophy and queer theory. Because one very common aspect that both Buddhism's teaching and queer theory have been not in agreement with the materialistic and capitalistic world that shapes the norms and defines what is happiness. From the Buddhist perspectives, we can divide happiness into two categories: mental and physical.

Physical happiness includes materialism and physical relations between people. If life includes pain, getting old, disease, and ultimately death, our bodies can also be a resource for our pleasure and satisfaction. In *The Erotic as Power*, Lorde (1984) stresses the erotic as "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual place firmly rooted on the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (p. 53). Erotic mentioned above includes both mental, physical and emotional that gives a human a priceless power. However, the current social system does not allow for its free practice. When Buddha teaches to accept suffering and free one's mind from meaningless thoughts, current societies tire themselves to apply restrictions and means of control over

its communities. Dominant culture fears that allowing queer in particular and minorities in general understand and use their power will result in losing control over them, as well as other groups. Buddhism stresses having competence and persistence in obtaining one's goal; therefore minorities are persistent in seeking for expression of their needs and desires. And that is the power that the oppressed have. They have abilities to listen and understand, they are willing and capable of feeling and creating relationships that are actually foundations for reaching happiness in the system we live in.

Moreover, Buddhism strongly stresses The First Truth that states life is suffering both physically and mentally. We endure psychological suffering like loneliness frustration, fear, embarrassment, disappointment, and anger. This is an irrefutable fact. It is realistic, but it can be avoided to gain satisfaction in life. As Hollibsugh and Moraga (1983) stated, "things that are kept private and hidden become painful and deformed" (p. 397). The Dalai Lama teaches us that the reason that bring the great happiness is through love and compassion. The key is the connection between humans. Queer communities also strive to gain the same – the right to love the people they choose, not the ones chosen for them. Hollibaugh and Moraga (1983) give an analysis of women who can find happiness by being with other women is something that "that women always wanted" (p. 398). In this case they are free to "throw out the role to explore the sexuality [...] let her express other part of the character." If the queer can be accepted, then people from this marginalized group would not be limited to express themselves.

One of the other approaches of Buddhism is a non-intentional approach to life, and it rejects conceptual categories. Understanding that modern society is dealing with an assemblage of attitudes and discursive practices, Buddhism notices the unimportance of

intentionality. There is no need for the answer for all the questions as a scientific approach suggests, and what humans call intentionality differs from what societies might seek for explanation and dealing with the abnormal. In the article “Sex Panics” (1989), Duggan analyzes how public fear created by dominant ones, takes actions in destruction and abandon the oppressed culture. The power of those marginalized groups is in intentionality- who they are and whom they represent was given to them, not chosen.

Additionally, the language of metaphors has dominated the narrative among the queer communities. They have been given different names, based on the privileged system. Humans became objects as Butler (1990) explains that sex has become a fully social category where labeling is a culture. However, Buddhism recognizes the limitations of language as Olson (2000) noticed:

[f]rom its inception [...] due to its human origins for the purposes of communication, which suggests that words have no intrinsic worth or metaphysical grounding in a supreme power or entity [...] language can never capture the way things really are due to its inherent limitations. (p. 25)

Buddhism also teaches us not to be dualistic, but truly be one with your life as the subtle mind of nirvana. Subtle here means that it is right here. We cannot see it because we are living it. When we live we do not think about it, but the minute we think about it we become dualistic. What this lesson represents is feeling the life rather than seeing it or touching it. It is a light critique of materialism that functions in the current world. Once we start thinking and reasoning, we lose the true value of the thing around.

Conclusion. Based on Buddhists’ beliefs, happiness is the result of an enlightened mind, whereas suffering is caused by a distorted mind. This is very significant. A

distorted mind, in contrast to an enlightened mind, is one that is not in tune with reality. Can we say that the majority of the society has distorted mind? The question remains unanswered, but what can be said is there is a big contradiction in the society in the sense that those who are “free” spiritually and physically are actually socially imprisoned to fit into certain criteria of the disrupted system. Although queer theories are often controversial and Buddhist beliefs very peaceful and calm, I believe they share a vast commonality, which is letting people have their own beliefs, not imposing others’ thoughts or ideas on them. They are both sets of ideas to guide people into expressing themselves and accept suffering as an unavoidable part of life. Moreover, they both push the boundaries not to accept the materialistic and capitalistic world that we live in nowadays, rather find happiness in conversation, relationships, and other intangible values.

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