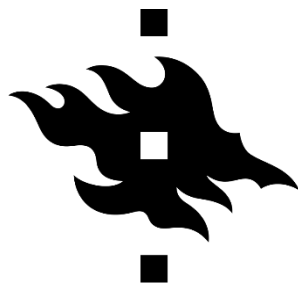# Constructing the Vietnamese Queer Identities:

A Hierarchy of Class, Gender, and Sexuality

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Abstract

This qualitative research project studies the way in which the Vietnamese queer youth (including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and genderqueer) conceptualize their identities, and the interplay between their self-conceptualization, gender performance, and their interpretation of roles in relationships. Taken place during a time period when positive changes are taking place in the Vietnamese law regarding queer rights, this study also looks at the activist works of community organizations advocating for queer rights, and how such organizations, through their introduction to notions of rights and diversity, help construct the way young Vietnamese conceptualize queerness. Data from personal interviews suggests that many informants still strongly conform to heteronormativity, gender norms, and an essentialist characterization of queerness, which in turn regulates their gender performances and places restrictions on their romantic relationships. These interviews also paint a fragmented reflection of the Vietnamese queer youth community, with a strong degree of separation among different queer groups, and the emergence of a queer hierarchy informed by class, gender and sexuality.

The collected data involves qualitative interviews conducted on seventeen young queer people in Vietnam. Half of these informants are volunteer activists working with an organization for queer rights in Ho Chi Minh City. This research also includes the author's fieldwork observation and notes on the interactions with the informants outside of the interview settings and into the queer field of Vietnam. Guided by feminist methodology, this qualitative study aims to give a voice to marginalized identities and challenge the dominant gendered and classed structures that grant social acceptance to some queer identities while further marginalizing other queers through the regulation of gender performance and desires.

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1. Introduction: *Being queer, then and now*

It was an afternoon in December 2014. Bình, my uncle's boyfriend, was carrying me on his motorbike amidst the busy street of Saigon. He asked me about the progress of my thesis, and we exchanged some comments about the research. Navigating between different flows of vehicles, he reflected on the past:

> Being gay now is much easier than in the past. Society is more open and accepting, and there are many venues where you can hang out now. Back then, when I was growing up, the options were very limited. There was a swimming pool, a cinema, and a few coffee shops. These places were almost exclusive for homosexuals because normal people were afraid of us.

"Back then", in his reflection, was the Vietnamese society around the turn of the 21st century. During this time, "homosexuality" was a common discourse used to refer to all queer identities, which were positioned as abnormal and unnatural against the normative cisgender, heterosexual identity (Phạm, 2013). In 2000, a Vietnamese Marriage and Family law specified the prohibition of same-sex marriage (ISEE, 2014). In 2002, the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids, and Social Affairs of Vietnam declared that homosexuality was a "social evil," and placed it in the same blacklist with illegal drug use and prostitution, while the media and the press characterized "homosexuality" as a dangerous, contagious disease (UNDP & USAID, 2014). In 2005, the Civil Code prohibited sex-reassignment surgery, and denied the gender recognition of those who already went through the surgery.

Fast forward to over a decade later, the conditions of life for queers in Vietnam have clearly improved. Between 2014 and 2015, two modifications in the law were made reflecting positive changes in the Vietnamese public's attitude toward queer identities. On June 19th 2014, the Vietnamese Congress passed a new Marriage and Family law which lifted the existing prohibition on same-sex union. This same law, however, did not legalize the marriage of same-sex couples (ISEE, 2014). This subtle change occupied an ambiguous position, in which the Vietnamese government, though refusing to recognize the legal status

of a same-sex union, allowed its presence as a cultural practice. Compared to the non-distant past where homosexuality was considered a "social evil", this modification rang loudly as a positive change despite its limitation.

The second positive change in the law regarding queer lives happened on November 24th 2015, when the Congress passed a law legalizing sex change. This law would be in effect starting January 2017, which would authorize sex-reassignment surgery in Vietnam as well as recognize the new gender and gender-related rights of those who have undergone the surgery (Lương, 2015; Mai, 2015). However, it is worth noting that under this new law, sex-reassignment surgery would be the prerequisite for those who want to change their gender status on legal documents. In other words, the recognition of the new gender would only be applied for transsexuals, not the whole transgender community.

Regardless of these setbacks in the law, it is evident that the queer youth of Vietnam today live in a much more accepting and open atmosphere compared to their previous counterparts. Within the last decade, there has been funding coming from foreign countries to establish non-profit organizations that work toward equal rights for LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) people in Vietnam. The two main organizations specialized in Vietnamese LGBT rights are the *Institute for Studies of Society, Economics and Environment* (ISEE), with its office based in Hanoi, and *Information, Connecting and Sharing* (ICS), with its office in Ho Chi Minh City. ICS and ISEE work together to lobby for LGBT rights through meeting with the press and law makers, organizing events and workshops on LGBT issues to the public, and conducting research projects advocating for human rights, freedom of expression, and cultural diversity. In recent years, the two NGOs also organize Pride events in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

These positive changes in the social environment around young Vietnamese queers, together with the support of community organizations, were initially what motivated me to begin this research project. As a feminist researcher, I was interested in studying the life experiences of the queer youths in Vietnam during a time period when there was, seemingly, less exclusion and marginalization. In particular, my focus in this thesis is about

how these young people make sense of their queer identities, and how such conceptualization is reflected in their identity performance and social interactions. To put it theoretically, I am studying the manifestation of agency within a changing social structure, where notions of pride and individuality replace the discourse of shaming, and visibility tactics replace the politics of exclusion. The changing social structure here also includes the workshops and training opportunities for queer youths, organized by ISEE and ICS. One cannot deny how these organizations, through their activism and introduction to notions of rights and diversity, transform the way these young people conceptualize their identities.

The self can never be understood apart from its society. When I began my fieldwork in Vietnam, my goal was to study the way in which my informants interpreted and conceptualized their queerness. The data I collected not only answered some of the questions I previously had regarding the self and individual performance, but also reflected one collective image of the community that I aimed to understand and represent. Sadly, that was a picture of hierarchical relationships, division, discrimination, and further marginalization. Through my interviews and fieldwork observations, I have found a fragmented queer community that carries the norms of heterosexuality and gender roles into the construction of its sub-categories, which creates a new social reality that is no less entrapping and stigmatizing than the one these young people initially seek to escape. These new social constructions and new norms together envision a queer *habitus*, to use Bourdieu's (1990a) term, one that sets restriction on certain performances, one that prioritizes some middle-class dispositions while characterizing others as tasteless and vulgar. However, it was not how classed the queer field was which struck me by surprise, but rather, how this field was constructed as gendered and heterosexist. Lisa Duggan (2003) described this tendency as "homonormativity", the idea that queer politics, instead of challenging heteronormativity and gender roles, upholds these norms in its practices. The construction of this thesis is then revolved around this central concept: through "homonormativity", I will analyze the conceptualization of the queer identities and the queer habitus in Vietnam, and explaining the queer hierarchy, informed by gender,

sexuality and class, that I encounter in my field work. The threads that connect through this thesis are the two research questions:

RQ 1: How does an essentialist self-conceptualization drive the gender performance of queer youth in Vietnam?
RQ 2: What constitutes the habitus shared by the queer youth in Vietnam?

These two research questions both attempt to paint an overview image of the queer youth community in Vietnam, and how this community is constantly shaped and reproduced through norms of gender, sexuality, and class. As these notions altogether construct the ideal representation of queerness, the emergence of a queer hierarchy becomes inevitable. My study therefore also seeks to address the construction of this hierarchy and demonstrate how axes of class, gender, and sexuality interact to create different queer identities through a "matrix of oppression", a paradigm coined by Patricia Hill Collins (2000).

In this thesis, I use "queer" as an identity category as well as the umbrella term to refer to all non-heterosexual, non-gender-normative identities. This means that "queer" can include, but not limited to, gay, lesbian, transsexual, transgender, bisexual, queer, and gender-queer people. The choice of this term arrives from the meaning of "queer", or rather the lack thereof. "Queer" is a volatile concept; it refers to an unfixed, unstable, free-floating identity deviant from normative construction, "an identity without an essence" (Callis, 2009; Halperin, 1997, p. 62). This allows "queer" to be inclusive: it can cover a wide range of different non-normative identities as well as being an identity category on its own. This study will explore both of these meanings.

The structure of this thesis will be as follow: in Chapter Two, using previous research studies, I will locate the queer identities in the social context of Asia and Vietnam, giving a general background of how these identities are conceptualized in the Vietnamese society. In Chapter Three, I will introduce the theoretical concepts relevant to this study through the works of Michel Foucault (1978), Judith Butler (1990, 1993), Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1990), and Beverly Skeggs (2004) regarding the construction of the queer identities and the

queer space. Chapter Four is central on methodology and the research process of this study. In this chapter, I will discuss the full process of how I carry out my research, which methods I use to collect my data, and which methods I apply to analyze them. My data will be analyzed in three subsequent chapters: Chapter Five establishes the connection between an essentialist conceptualization of the queer identities and the social reality experienced by my informants; Chapter Six discusses the manifestation of class in the queer field and the construction of a queer habitus; and Chapter Seven describes a queer hierarchy constructed from gender and class norms. Last, I will conclude with a discussion on how the Vietnamese queer youth identities are becoming products of post-colonial discourses, and address the implications that follow. The limitations of this study and ideas for future research will also be mentioned in this chapter.

2. Queer in context: Previous research on LGBTQ people in Vietnam

This following chapter aims to provide an overview of queer lives in the context of Asia and Vietnam. I will briefly describe studies of queers in Asia, following by an overview of the historical influences that help construct ideas of gender and sexuality in Vietnam, and discuss how queer identities are conceptualized within this system. Previous research studies on Vietnamese queers will also be introduced in this chapter.

2.1 Locating studies of Queers in the context of Asia

As queerness is a comparatively new field of study in Vietnam, I first position my study within the framework of queer scholarship in Asian contexts. In contemporary queer literature, Asian identities are still underrepresented, a trend that Poon (2005) points out and critiques in her article titled "A Missing Voice". Poon asserts that many scholars on sexuality have been trained in the dominant cultures of the West, which leads them to ignore the knowledge from the less dominant cultures or to regard such knowledge as irrelevant or less legitimate. This divergence in world views between White and Asian queers therefore accounts for an underrepresentation of Asians in queer studies. The impact of such invisibility is problematic as queerness is only constructed in a White domain, which embraced the notion that queerness is a "White man disease" and does not exist in Asian community (Poon, 2005, p. 98).

Looking at the social construction of queerness in Asian local contexts, Jackson (2009) challenges the notion of an international lesbian/gay identity. The author points to the many research studies on Asian queer cultures which have showed how global discourse of queerness have been adopted and given new meanings by the local cultures. For example, although the word "gay" is globally used to identify homosexuality, it does not imply a universal construction of a gay identity, but rather the discourse is adopted accordingly based on the local contexts (Adam, Duyvendak, & Krouwel, 1999). Jackson (2009) uses Thai terminology of queer identities to demonstrate this point: while certain terms are developed as a combination of global usage and Thai context usage, some terms also ignore the global meaning completely. This reaffirms how the use of queer-related terms in the

local language should be taken into account in studies that attempt to analyze the construction of queerness in any given context.

Consequently, this raises the question whether one can refer to Asian Queer Studies as a fixed field, and whether the usage of the queer, developed in Western discourse, is a reasonable framework for studying non-normative gender identities in non-Western contexts. Tang (2011) points out that over-generalization could be problematic, given that the construction of queerness (or normativity) varies based on the local contexts. Similarly, Wieringa, Blackwood, and Bhaiya (2007) assert that queers reflect and reproduce the gender norms of their immediate locations instead of following a global queer culture. What is considered "queer" in one Asian country may be seen as a possible variation of "normativity" in another, turning "Asian queer" into a contestable notion. It is also worth noting that the uneven accessibility to research gives certain nations a more dominant voice while rendering some other silenced or invisible in the field of "Asian Queer" Studies. Martin, Jackson, McLelland, and Yue (2008) show that while China, Thailand, India, and Filipino are frequently mentioned in the queer field, there is a lack of relevant studies on the Vietnamese and Cambodian queer communities. One possible explanation is that the diversity of the languages in the region may inhibit the sharing of research (Martin et al., 2008). Given that a crucial part of queer theory looks at the linguistic elements of identity construction, one can see that the lack of a shared, common language in Asia gives space for more possibilities of reproducing, and consequently interpreting, local identities.

The social experiences of non-normative gender identities, within each Asian country itself, vary depending on the positioning of each individual on the hierarchy of race, class, and gender. Social exclusion and hierarchical relationships also exist on a sub-scale level, leading to further marginalization of certain Asian queer identities. Blackwood and Johnson (2012, p. 488) examined the contexts of Thailand and South India and concluded that sexuality in these two countries was "a free-play zone where new styles or expectations are quickly taken up". Women, however, continued to be marginalized and sexually "policed" by the regime of heteronormativity, despite the constant and flexible changes in

constructions of sexual identities and legitimacy. For this reason, in these two countries female queers were perceived to be more acceptable within the private sphere, while queer males could normatively pursue an extensive sexual life outside of the home with multiple partners and sex workers (Blackwood & Johnson, 2012). This study shows that the hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity also makes certain queer identities become more socially acceptable than others. Any analysis of queerness, therefore, should take into account intersectionality and acknowledge how notions of race, ethnicity, or class also contribute to the construction of the queer identity.

Altogether, these studies of queers in different Asian cultures suggest that the conceptualization of queerness in a particular culture will tend to carry the hierarchical gender and sexual norms embraced and reinforced by that culture, resulting in local variations in characterizing and positioning different queer groups. The use of concepts developed in the West discourse (such as the LGBTQ acronym) to study queerness in Asia is therefore also a contestable notion. For this reason, I turn to the general concept "queer" to relate to my informants and their non-normative identities in this thesis. If they instead self-identify with one of the acronyms in the Western LGBTQ framework, I will address them as such.

2.2. Queer lives in Vietnam: A brief history

Situated in the southeast of Asia, Vietnam has a long, complex history of foreign colonization which brings along different cultural influences on its construction of gender and sexuality. The country experienced a long history of Chinese domination, followed by more than a century of French colonialism and American military involvement. After gaining independence in 1975, Vietnam adopted a centrally-planned economy model, which was later replaced by a mixed economy following the Đổi Mới [New Change] Reform. In the present day, Vietnam self-declares as a socialist nation with a socialist-oriented market economy. As a country that shares political values with other communist regimes while welcoming Western investment and mass media, the modern Vietnam is characterized as having a hybrid identity shaped by both Western imperialism and

communist dependency (Raffin, 2000). The change in the Vietnamese public perception regarding queer people perfectly reflects this hybrid identity: although stigmatization still occurs, in recent years there has been increasing acceptance for queer identities manifested through laws, public discussions, and media presentations.

Previous studies on gender and sexuality in Vietnam address the significant role of Confucianism, a philosophy brought into the country through the Chinese domination, in shaping education and the teaching of familial values (La, 2012; Noonan, 2004; Wells, 2005). Although this philosophy has lost its influence over time, Confucian gender norms are still prevalent in the Vietnamese daily practices and discourses. Confucianism emphasizes traditional gender roles, sexual dimorphism, and the continuation of the family lineages (Blanc, 2005; Feng et al., 2012). Central to the teaching of Confucianism (and Chinese philosophy as a whole) is the theory of Yin and Yang, the idea that life is created from two opposing yet complementary forces. Seeking the union between yin and yang is thus believed to lead to happiness and to the rightful, natural order of the world. As men and women are represented as opposing energies in this philosophy, it gives rise to the cultural expectation for heterosexual union, while at the same time stigmatizing same-sex relationships as "unnatural" (Zhan, 2002).

Confucian gender norms were largely rejected by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) during and after the Vietnam War as the party relied on both male and female participation in the battlefield and in reforming the post-war economy. During this period, sexuality was highly suppressed as the government emphasized "the sacrifices of private sentiment for the collective good" (Khuất, 1997; UNDP & USAID, 2014, p. 13). For those whose gender and sexuality deviated from the norm, there was no mentioning of them in the law in this period, making it difficult and confusing for officials who dealt with cases related to the matter (UNDP & USAID, 2014). For example, in 1997 the first public wedding between two men took place in Ho Chi Minh City. Although the event was condemned by the public, the police could not prosecute the couple because there was no law addressing same-sex marriage (Nguyễn, Lâm & Lê, 1999). A year later, the state of Vietnam began

their intervention into same-sex marriage: a lesbian marriage was ordered to be annulled after two months by the state in 1998 (UNDP & USAID, 2014). Same-sex marriage began to be prohibited starting 2000, and homosexuality (or queerness)[1] was addressed as well as criminalized by the state media in 2002, which labeled it as a "tệ nạn xã hội" [social evil] and placed it in the same category with drug use, prostitution, and gambling (Blanc, 1999; Horton, 2014; Rydstrom, 2006). The national campaign to fight against the "social evils" led to the arrest of many queers, and it also furthered the cultural stigmatization on this group (UNDP & USAID, 2014).

In the last decade, the cultural beliefs of gender and sexuality in Vietnam have been continuously transformed through the diffusion of foreign mass media, the development of technology, and the establishments of LGBT-right organizations. The increasing access to the internet and to international media outlets has opened a path to an alternative knowledge about gender and sexuality, in which homosexuality and transgender issues are not condemned or criminalized. This trend is most common in Vietnamese young people, who reportedly follow news from online sources rather than news from the state television (BBG, 2015). A previous study on Vietnamese young people and the internet showed that the youth in Hanoi increasingly turned to the internet to find answers for their sexual desires, identities, and practices (Ngô, Ross & Ratliff, 2008). The internet also gives space for the creation of online queer communities, bringing together queers from different parts of Vietnam (Phạm, 2013). This has a significant role in the development of LGBT-right activism in Vietnam: many of the administrators of these online forums later have become the main staff of ICS, an activist organization working toward equality for the LGBT community based in Ho Chi Minh City (Ho, n.d.).

ICS is now one of the leading organizations in Vietnam that lobbies for the rights of queers. Together with *Institute for Studies of Society, Economics and Environment* (ISEE), the non-profit enterprise produces research works on queer lives in Vietnam, getting close access to

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[1] In this period, "đồng tính/ đồng tính luyến ái" (direct translation: homosexuality) was a term used to refer to queers (people whose sexuality or gender deviate from the social norms). This includes (but is not limited to) non-heterosexuals (gay men, lesbian, bisexual) and transgender/transsexual people. (UNDP & USAID, 2014)

special queer groups such as street children. ICS receives the main funding from Western organizations such as the Ford Foundation and Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) to develop their research and training activities (ICS, 2016). For ISEE, most of the core staff of the organization have been educated in the US or Europe. This explains how their publications show a strong tie to knowledge developed from the West, as they use many Western theories and concepts related to gender and sexuality in their conceptualization of queers. For example, they adopt the Western acronym model LGBT to conceptualize queers in Vietnam. Both organizations attract a large number of followers[2] and volunteers; most of these are young people.

In 2012, Vietnam has its first official Pride event (Viet Pride), receiving the support from the Swedish Embassy in Hanoi (UNDP & USAID, 2014). Viet Pride becomes an annual event of every summer onward, celebrated both in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Viet Pride 2015 witnesses growing public acceptance for LGBT rights: the event happily took place in Nguyen Hue Street, a public space in the central area of Ho Chi Minh City and received no threat to be shut down from the Vietnamese government or any protest by residents of the region. Matthew Clayfield (2015), a news writer who attended the event, described it as an "LGBT Disneyland". Later in the same year Vietnam passed a law that allowed transsexual people to change their name and gender on legal documents. This law, together with the one that decriminalize same-sex union passed in 2014, both reflect a more accepting environment for queers in Vietnam, although as previously discussed, they both have their own setbacks. From being labeled as a "social evil" and a disease, homosexuality and transgender issues have increasingly integrated into the mainstream culture of Vietnam, into media productions, education, and public discussions (SIDA, 2014). The following sections will address how queer identities have been conceptualized in these public realms – then and now.

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[2] Facebook statistics: ICS has over 55000 followers, while ISEE has over 89000 (as of March 2016).

2.3. Conceptualizing queerness in Vietnam, then and now

Then: Queerness as a Western trend

As previously discussed, queerness was not addressed by the current Vietnamese government prior to the turn of the 21st century. When it first became a public issue, it was stigmatized through different authority channels such as the state knowledge and mainstream media. According to Phạm (2013), an example for the stigmatization of queer identities can be found in The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Vietnam, the very first state encyclopedia, published in 2005. In this major work, non-normative forms of sexualities were mentioned in relations to concepts such as "homosexuality", "perversion", and "family". "Homosexuality" was defined as:

> [s]exual intercourse between people of the same sex, who usually have normally developed genitalia. Homosexuality is more prevalent among males rather than females. Homosexuality has long existed in the Western world, and in some countries it is legalized. Recently, the public community pays more attention to homosexuality because it is one of the major causes for HIV/AIDS ("Encyclopedic Dictionary of Vietnam" cited in Phạm, 2013, p. 89, my translation).

This definition implied a cultural knowledge at the time which perceived sexual orientation to be the same, or defined by sexual behaviors. The claim that homosexuality was more common among men implied an invisibility of non-normative female bodies in public. The definition also marked a geographical distinction for homosexuality, implying that it belonged to the West, and failed to acknowledge an existing history of queers in Asia, confirming the cultural notion which characterized homosexuality as a "White man disease" (Poon, 2005, p. 98).

The definition of "perversion" in this dictionary also stigmatized homosexual encounters. "Perversion" was defined as:

> Sickening sexual intercourse due to a variety of complex reasons, mostly psychological, that makes the person find pleasures in having coitus in an abnormal

way (such as anal sex, homosexual sex, rape, necrophilia, etc.). Perversion causes many serious health issues such as sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS, etc. as well as negative social implications. ("Encyclopedic Dictionary of Vietnam" cited in Phạm, 2013, p. 89, my translation)

In this definition, homosexual intercourse was constructed as a pathological condition with negative influences to the society. This was seconded in the definition of "family," which was claimed to be threatened by homosexuality and AIDS as "[the two] had the potential to spread out and threaten the structure and function of the traditional family" ("Encyclopedic Dictionary of Vietnam" cited in Phạm, 2013, p. 90). Phạm concluded that homosexuality was viewed in relation to the HIV epidemic and this furthered the prejudice against homosexual people in Vietnam at the time.

In 2012, ISEE conducted surveys and interviews in two major cities of Vietnam, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh. The project overall looked at attitudes and perceptions of Vietnamese people on homosexual identities, and discussed whether homosexuality was of natural or social cause (Nguyễn, Vũ, & Lê, 2012). More than 70% of the survey participants believed that homosexual men paid attention to their appearance, wore make-up, and dressed like women, and more than half believed that lesbians dressed and gestured like men. This revealed the way in which the two distinct categories "homosexual" and "transgender" in Western discourse were perceived as one and the same in the Vietnamese construction of queerness. Regarding the causes of homosexuality, three fourths of the respondents characterized homosexuality as innate; within this population, two thirds considered it a genetic disorder or a biological error. Some believed that homosexuality was caused from hormonal changes during the pregnancy period of the mother, leading to the failure of the fetus to develop into a fully male or female baby, while others referred to it as a psychological disorder (Nguyễn et al., 2012). Those who believed in the social causes of homosexuality gave reasons that homosexuals grew up in unhappy families, were spoiled by their parents, or were after a materialist, Western lifestyle (Nguyễn et al., 2012; Phạm, 2013). Half of the respondents contended that homosexuality needed to be changed or

"cured" through therapy, education, and social integration as it was a threat to the morality of the society.

Believing in curable homosexuality was also widely shared among medical doctors in Vietnam. In a book discussing medical problems, Doctor Lê Thuý Tươi (2003) wrote:

> We are Asian people, and this sexual disorder [homosexuality] creates negative implications for our family and society. The public community cannot support or accept homosexual relationships. Those who pretend to be homosexual (fake homosexuals) should get out of their condition and go back to the heterosexual population. And if you think you are the "real" homosexuals you can still revert back if you are determined. Your family and the society are always here to help you. If not, you will always be lost, lonely and condemned by society. (Lê, 2003, p. 99, my translation)

The notion that there were "fake" and "real" homosexual people came from a famous sexologist of Vietnam, Doctor Trần Bồng Sơn. In a publication about HIV and homosexuality, he claimed that there were two kinds of homosexuals: the "real" homosexual who constituted a very small percentage of the population, and the "fake" homosexuals, whose sexuality was merely the result of a Westernize lifestyle. Accordingly, the fake homosexuals could be revertible to heterosexuality. Trần asserted that the majority of the homosexual population in Vietnam was "fake" (Blanc. 2005; Colby, Cao & Doussantousse, 2004; Phạm 2013).

In terms of social roles and social functions, Nguyễn et al. (2012) showed that homosexual union was perceived as a threat to "traditional" heterosexual marriage, given the belief that heterosexuals may want to turn gay to avoid conflicts in heterosexual marriage. According to Phạm (2013), those who held such views did not look at gender equality or conflict resolution as a way to reduce problems in heterosexual marriage; instead, they believed that there should not be another option available for mating so that people would have no choice other than to commit to a heterosexual union. A number of respondents in Nguyễn et al.

(2012)'s study expressed sympathy for homosexual people and supported homosexual union, as long as it was held in silence and discretion to not affect the "healthy image of the heterosexual world" (Nguyễn et al. cited in Phạm, 2013, pp. 116-117). Gay couples were also deemed unsuitable to fulfill basic familial functions such as reproduction or raising children. The belief that children needed both a father and a mother for a complete development showed how homosexuality was resisted in Vietnam due to the cultural emphasis on gender roles, yin-yang dualism, and familial lineage continuation. The idea of "keeping the lineage" was inherent in the teaching of familial values in Vietnam which highlighted the role of reproduction and raising children (Horton, 2014; Pham, 2013). Families with non-heterosexual children therefore suffered shame and ridicule from the community for not being able to raise their children properly, and these children may be forced into marriage to help "save face" for the family (Schuler et al., 2006). A study by ISEE found that Vietnamese gay men were more likely than lesbians to be pressured into heterosexual marriage by their family expectations (Nguyễn, Vũ, & Phạm, 2013). This could be explained by the cultural emphasis on keeping the (patriarchal) familial lineage, with men being perceived as the carrier of the family name and bloodline.

Considered a sensitive topic, queerness was also rarely mentioned in the context of formal education in Vietnam. Horton (2014), through interviews with queer people in Hanoi, found that sexual-related knowledge, though being a part of the public education curriculum, was not carefully taught in schools. When sexuality was discussed, it was restricted within the framework of reproduction and HIV prevention, and within these contexts, homosexuality was depicted as a pathological disease (Horton, 2014; Khuất, Lê & Nguyễn, 2009). Consequently, a survey by World Health Organization, Ministry of Health, General Statistics Office and UNICEF in 2003 on Vietnamese youth reported that 40 percent of the respondents were not aware of homosexuality. Horton (2014) argued that the lack of formal discussion on homosexuality was a factor contributing to the feeling of isolation in LGBT youth, leading to suicidal attempts in some cases.

An analysis of queer representations in mainstream media of Vietnam provided a framework to understand how queerness was overall rejected or stigmatized by the public. In 2011, ISEE, working with the Academy of Journalism and Communication of Vietnam, published an article on discourse and messages in media news regarding homosexual and transgender people. Using content analysis, the study analyzed 502 news articles from well-known printed and online newspapers of Vietnam, showing how media helped shape the stigma and prejudice against the queer community. It revealed that the stigmatization against queer identities in the news came from both negative language use and the context in which queerness was mentioned. Only 29% of the studied articles focused on queers as the main topic, while the rest used this group as a way to attract readers. In more than half of the articles, the presence of queerness took place in a foreign context, where they were also perceived to be more acceptable. Accordingly, when positioned in the context of Vietnam, queers were portrayed as young people who ran after a Western style of life and expressed gender differently from the norm to be seen as trendy or fashionable.

The representation of homosexuality and homosexual intercourse in the Vietnamese media was strongly tied to the perceived detriment of moral values (ISEE & Academy of Journalism and Communication, 2011; UNDP & USAID, 2014). Homosexual intercourse was depicted as powerful, addicting, and having the potential of "trapping" people because of the pleasure it brought. Despite this claim, homosexual relationships were also portrayed as unstable, short-lived, and only used to satisfy the abnormal sex drive of those who were involved. It was seen as part of an unhealthy and irresponsible lifestyle in which people only sought instant gratification and ignored morality. Gay people were then perceived as having questionable dignity and engaging in social problems such as drugs or prostitution (ISEE & Academy of Journalism and Communication, 2011). Furthermore, 109 news articles (out of 502) of this 2011 study also attempted to explain the cause of homosexuality, within which only 20% attributed the cause of homosexuality to a variation in biology. The rest claimed that homosexuality was a contagious disease or an unhealthy lifestyle with the purpose to attract attention from the public. These articles also asserted that one could determine whether a person was homosexual or not based on the way they

talked, dressed, and gestured. Gay men were then portrayed as having feminine self-expression such as talking in a soft tone, wearing women's clothing, and using cosmetics products, while lesbians were portrayed as looking masculine, tough, and not having their breast developed (ISEE & Academy of Journalism and Communication, 2011). This media profile of homosexual people was based on gender expression, which, again, reflected the Vietnamese cultural conceptualization of gender and sexuality which did not distinguish between non-normative sexuality (homosexuals) and non-normative gender body (transgender). Similarly, there was no distinction among "gender identity", "gender expression", "sexual orientation" or "sexual behavior" in the local construction of queerness, as these concepts were all framed under the notion "giới" [direct translation: gender (but this term was also used when referring to sex and sexuality)]. This helped shape the combined image of a queer population who, based on the Vietnamese local discursive construction, were considered "half man half woman".

Now: A changing social atmosphere

In recent years, the representation of queers in the Vietnamese society has become more positive and less stigmatizing. Documentaries about the life of transgender people have been aired on television channels, while radio programs discussing transgender and homosexual issues are increasing in numbers (UNDP & USAID, 2014). The mainstream press also organizes series of articles written about the hardship facing LGBT people. In 2010, Tuổi Trẻ, one of the largest newspapers in Vietnam, published a letter written by an 18-year-old gay student sharing his desire to be accepted by his family. This article received a lot of positive responses from the queer readers, which opened a lively discussion and sharing of personal stories about homosexuality on the next issues of the newspaper (Kỳ, 2010). It finally concluded with an interview with Dr. Huỳnh Văn Sơn, a famous, highly respected psychologist of Vietnam, who stated that "homosexuality is normal" (Trung, 2010).

The work of LGBT-right organizations such as ICS and ISEE also play a central role in this changing atmosphere. These two organizations aim at changing the Vietnamese laws

regarding queers, and they create social change through different channels such as education, research publications, and social events. According to a report by UNDP and USAID (2014), many universities, social clubs and youth groups across Vietnam begin to work with ICS in the recent years to provide training workshop about gender, sexual diversity, and LGBT rights for their students. These workshops generate a lot of awareness about queer identities in Vietnam and also create a group of straight allies for the queer community (UNDP & USAID, 2014). ISEE and ICS also provide training programs with scholarship for LGBTQ youths who want to create social change for their community such as ViLead and Người Khởi Xướng [Youth Initiative Development Program]. These programs target young people and aim to train these participants into leaders and initiators who will later make a difference to the social development of the queer community and of Vietnam as a whole (ISEE, 2015).

ICS also extends its service to target the parents of LGBT children and attract a number of families to use the counseling service provided by the organization. This leads to the creation of PFLAG Vietnam [Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians and Gays in Vietnam], an activist group led by the parents of Vietnamese homosexual children, in 2011. PFLAG Vietnam works closely with ISEE and ICS in the process of writing and publishing materials related to the experiences of families with LGBT children. One of these materials, published in 2014, is a book composed of personal stories written by these parents themselves about the journey from denial to accepting the sexuality of their children (ICS, 2014). They also publish handbooks in Q&A format to help with the coming-out process of LGBT youth, and to counteract with the common "myth" and "misconceptions" about these queer groups. The distinction between homosexuals and transgender people is one of the emphases in these training materials, along with the emphasis on the naturalness of queers. Accordingly, queerness begin to be validated in the Vietnamese society, as demonstrated through the change in the laws regarding same-sex marriage and sex-reassignment surgery in 2014 and 2015.

This overview on queerness in Vietnam, then and now, reflects the changing attitude of the Vietnamese public regarding these non-normative identities. While shame and stigma were central to perceiving queerness in the (not-so-distant) past, the discourse of inclusion and validation became the new voice to represent queerness in the recent years. Along with this changing social atmosphere, these studies also reveal a revision of how queerness is conceptualized in the Vietnamese society. Evidently, Western queer categories such as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) were not initially present in the Vietnamese local construction of queerness. While these categories make distinction between different queer groups based on notions of sex, gender, and sexuality, there was no similar distinction in how the Vietnamese public, media, and medical authorities in the past conceptualized the queer identity. In this local perception, any identity *queering* from the sexual and gender norm of the Vietnamese culture were suppressed, whether through shame, isolation, or punishment, and the "normal" was embraced and upheld to ensure the stability of the society. As these Western categories were introduced into the Vietnamese society through the works of activist organizations, they became essential in changing the Vietnamese social attitude toward queerness. Most notably, these categories turn queerness into forms of identities that reconcile, resemble, and even validate the gender norms and gender hierarchy in this society (instead of questioning these norms). Yet, does this happen without implications? This is the main question that I aim to answer in this thesis, through the three analytical chapters addressing how Vietnamese queer youths conceptualize their identities, and how this constructs a habitus, and consequently a hierarchy, within this community. In the next chapter, I will discuss the main theories and concepts that I rely on to help me answer this central question.

3. Theoretical framework and Research Questions

The following chapter gives an overview of theories and concepts from which this research study develops. In the first section, I will discuss the meaning of the main concept "queer", which is used primarily throughout the thesis as an umbrella term for LGBTQ identities, in relation to Queer Theory which classifies sexuality and gender as social constructs. The second section will discuss class in the construction of identities and the role of class in shaping the queer habitus.

3.1 Queer Theory

The perspective of social constructionism is central to the development of the concept "queer" and queer theory, which treats all identities as social constructs. While essentialism characterizes identities as the manifestation of natural differences, the social constructionist standpoint asserts that identity categories are merely social divisions created by human. Whether identities are "nature or nurture" has long been a topic of discussion in the studies of queers. Both perspectives, according to Steven Epstein (1987), have their own implications for the legitimation of the gay/lesbian community: while essentialism insists on the natural differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals and may pave ways to anti-gay eugenics, constructionism may position homosexual people as "victims of false consciousness" and delegitimize their existence in society (Epstein, 1987, p.22). Epstein (1987, p. 34) then advocated for a modified constructionist perspective which would conceptualize LGBTQ identities as "both inescapable and transformable […] and capable of giving rise to a variety of political expressions". Queer Theory may have the potential to achieve this balance given that it promotes the de-categorizing of identities, paving ways to "transformable" identities, while at the same time, acknowledging the external structures that entrap people in these categories, making reality seem "inescapable".

Queer theory is developed from the term "queer", a concept that is quite difficult to narrow down due to its lack of a singular meaning (Callis, 2009). In this thesis alone, "queer" is used with two meanings. First, it refers to "whatever [that] is at odds with normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (Halperin, 1995, p. 62). With this meaning, "queer" can be seen

as an identity category to be used by individuals who question the hegemony of heterosexuality and heteronormativity in their society or want to be fluid and free in their own self-conceptualization (Callis, 2009; Jagose, 1996). "Queer" as an identity category allows its identifiers to be "queer" in their own way and embrace the "queerness" whether through their sexual orientation, gender performance, or gender identities (Daumer, 1992). The second meaning of "queer" also shares some relations with the first definition. Because "queer" is about anything that deviates from the norm, it can be used as an inclusive short-hand term to refer to all gender and sexual minorities. Here, "queer" can be used as an acronym for LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual, Queer, Intersex, Asexual). The plus indicates the endless possibilities of identity conceptualization, the underpinning idea of "queer".

"Queer" as a category paves way to the development of Queer Theory, a critical theory that focuses on how gender and sexuality categories are social constructions. Queer theory looks at identities with the perception that there are no fixed and stable identities, questioning the use of categories to label or define people and groups. It holds the position that different forms of sexual identities, including the ones that are marginalized, are social constructs instead of being natural types. In this view, heterosexuality, as a hegemonic classification, is critically challenged because it is also a social construct and cannot be taken as "natural" or self-validating. Queer theory recognizes how identity categories can be used as means for social control, and through this recognition, it analyzes the role of discourses in the construction of these identities and by extension challenges the discursive power system (Callis, 2009; Epstein, 1987; Foucault, 1978).

Central to the development of Queer Theory are the works of Michel Foucault (1978) and Judith Butler (1990, 1993). While Foucault inspired the development of Queer Theory through his study of the socio-historical construction of sexuality, Butler further developed this theory through her observation on the performativity of gender (Callis, 2009). The following sections will attempt to provide an overview of these two theoretical works as foundation upon which my research study is developed.

Foucault: Sexuality as a Social Construction

Michel Foucault is believed to inspire the development of Queer Theory through his major work in 1978, *The History of Sexuality*. In this book, Foucault (1978) challenged the repressive hypothesis which gave the impression that many forms of sexualities had been repressed by the society. Instead, the theorist asserted that sexuality itself was a historical construct, and that instead of repression, there was an explosion in discourse concerning sex and sexuality. The discursive production of the "truth of sex" held the power to manage and subjugate bodies and lives; through the development of medicalized categories relating to sex, "the truth of sex" was created, reproduced, and validated, turning sexual behaviors into stable, essential identities (Foucault, 1978, p.57). Inadvertently, sexual categories that distinguished between different populations such as "heterosexual," "homosexual," "bisexual," "transgender," or "gender normals", were to be seen as a product of the *bio-power* that aimed to categorize and organize individuals around norms. By giving these populations a medical identity and turning them into a "biological speciation", modern society could produce knowledge of the deviants, the inferiors, and the perverts against an original, "normal" identity. Sexual identities, then, became a medium through which power and control could manifest.

Homosexuality, in Foucault's perspective, was also a medicalized discourse created by bio-power. According to Foucault (1978, p.43), although same-sex practices were already apparent before the emergence of this concept, the creation of the "homosexual" as a "species" led people to identify with it as a fixed, stable truth of the self. Following this development, homosexuality began to be regulated and studied as a pathological condition needed to be suppressed. The emergence of "homosexuality" as an identity category eventually paved way to what Foucault (1978, p.101) referred to as "reverse discourse", a type of discourse that challenged the stigmatization of the gay/lesbian identities. The homosexual community has since defended and legitimized their position in society using the same identity category that was previously used to stigmatize their existence.

This example shows that language can be used as an instrument to exercise and maintain bio-power, while also through language strategies of resistance can be developed. The same discourse framework which confines marginalized identities also provides them with means to contest against such repression; for example, gay men and lesbians rely on the idea that "homosexual" is a natural identity category to validate their sexual interests (Foucault, 1978). Yet, this also means that the validity and prospects of such resistance can be compromised. As Watson (2009, p.119) describes: "since resistance is not and cannot be external to systems of power and knowledge, oppositional strategies that attempt to replace ascendant ideologies with non-normative ones are inherently contradictory". In other words, contradiction arrives as the discourse upon which resistance is developed is the very discourse that it may need to challenge. The use of the term "the third gender", for example, while aiming to naturalize and validate the existence of those who do not conform to social norms of sexuality and gender, could be problematic as it seconds the assumption that there are different "natural" forms of identities, and that identities need to be "natural," or biological, to be validated. Discussing the category "the third gender", Zimman and Hall (2009) pointed out that many transsexuals chose to identify as either man or woman, and the categorization of a "third gender" may take away their right to self-identification. Even the category "transgender", commonly use in queer politics to legitimize the existence of this population, runs into the same problem of being "inherently contradictory" (Watson, 2009, p.120) as it produces transgender as a knowable and fixed category (Westbrook, 2010). The need to establish a category for transgender people furthers the understanding that they are not real men or women, and it also reproduces the assumption that all people have a known and static gender. In other words, identities are naturalized and perceived as an inner truth based on this process of categorization, while in fact they are constantly shaped, transformed and given meanings based on their spatial and temporal contexts.

It is apparent that the attempt to reconstruct the gender system by adding new categories, though targeting the normative binary gender system, may as well help stabilize this rigid regime and render certain individuals being misrecognized. In this case, the category "queer" can be helpful as it is developed to be an open, inclusive category, resisting this

rigidity by removing the idea of a fixed identification category. Yet, it can also be problematic given that the meaning of "queer" will shift accordingly to how "normal" is constructed in a given society. As Butler (1993) emphasizes, norms are inherently unstable, leading to the constant changes in meaning of sex and sexual categories in different societies and eras. Butler (2012) also notes that the powerful logics that shape the way people think and make sense of their world does not allow certain modes of sexuality to be expressed by language. Therefore, certain forms of livings remain "unrecognizable" as they exist in the margin of the discursive normative framework.

Butler: Heterosexual Matrix and Performativity

Judith Butler wrote *Gender Troubles* in 1990 and *Bodies that Matter* in 1993; both texts are influential to the development of Queer Theory. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990, p.6) writes about the "compulsory order of sex/gender/desire": the idea that these phenomena are intertwined and structuring one another through the cultural expectation for consistency. The theorist stresses that sex itself is a social construction, and it is the repeated act of gender performance that gives sex an "internal essence". She maintains that gender is culturally intelligible only when it is instituted in a stable, coherent relationship with sex and compulsory heterosexuality. Butler (1990) develops the concept heterosexual matrix to refer to the way identities are interpreted through the tripartite system of sex/gender/desire. This matrix renders certain identities as coherent and intelligible only if "a stable sex [is] expressed thorough a stable gender [and] the compulsory practice of heterosexuality" (Butler, 1990, p. 151). "Gender trouble" then occurs when a person fails to achieve this consistency in the heterosexual matrix. Both homosexual people and transgender people provide examples for this "gender trouble": while a transgender woman is unintelligible because her body disrupts the expected coherence of sex and gender, a lesbian would cause "gender trouble" through her sexual desire which deviates from what is expected of her gender, part of which is defined by the practice of compulsory heterosexuality.

Butler (1990, pp. 140-141) characterizes gender as "a stylized repetition of acts" and a "performative accomplishment", stressing that there is no stable, continuous gender identity

but rather these performative, repeated acts create for both the actors and the audiences an illusion that such a coherent gender identity exists. Continuing this argument, Butler (1990, 1993) challenges the common gender/sex distinction which views gender as "social" and the sexed body as "biological"; she argues that both are socially constructed and sex *is* gender. In this view, the body is not only the material site upon which gender is constructed but also constructed and shaped based on how gender is understood and enacted. This means that the sexed body is "discursively constructed"; through classification it exists as if it were "natural," while in reality the physical body becomes sexed through the process of gender conditioning which ensures that it remains culturally intelligible. The sexed body becomes the social product of gender police, as Butler (1992, p.10) describes in an interview:

> I think for a woman to identify as a woman is a culturally enforced effect. I don't think that it's a given that on the basis of a given anatomy, an identification will follow. I think that "coherent identification" has to be cultivated, policed, and enforced; and that the violation of that has to be punished, usually through shame.

Butler (1990, 1993) looks at the "drag queen" cultural phenomenon as an example for how gender is performative and how the cultural truth of gender and sexuality can be challenged. Butler (1993, p. 125) writes: "Drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality." In other words, drag queen exposes the instability between gender and sex; through the drag queen image, the imitation and repetition that makes up gender is revealed, exposing the absence of an original, authentic truth within sex and/or gender. This in turn questions the hegemonic status of heterosexuality and the characterization of it as authentic and natural. Drag parody, therefore, carries the subversive power to resist and destabilize the heterosexual matrix which polices and regulates our identities and performances in everyday lives.

The works of Foucault (1978) and Butler (1990, 1993) both reflect the perspective which characterizes gender and sexuality (and by the same token, any form of identity

classifications) to be a cultural product. This, however, stands in contrast with the tendency of queer politics in Vietnam, which asserts that an LGBTQ identity is "natural" and therefore legitimate. In my interviews, I found that the emphasis on a "natural" queer identity led many of my informants to "cultivate, police, and enforce" (Butler, 1992, p. 10) their gender performance and even other queer identities. This inadvertently created a new social reality with new norms and standards, which was the form of gender police that Butler (1990, 1992, 1993) previously discussed. My first research question, therefore, looks into how my informants perform their gender in relation to their essentialist self-conceptualization of queerness. The aim of this question is to find the connection between a natural-claiming identity and how such an identity is performed to becoming "natural":

RQ 1: How does an essentialist self-conceptualization drive the gender performance of queer youth in Vietnam?

Although gender and sexuality are central elements in producing the queer identity, other identity markers such as race and class should not be dismissed from the process of conceptualizing queerness. In the local context of my study, class also makes up a dimension that shapes the queer identity. In the next section, I will introduce another theory central to the development of my thesis. The concept "habitus" will be discussed in relation to the construction of the contemporary queer identity. Bourdieu's (1984, 1990a) theories on taste, the habitus and the field create the potential to study queer identities as classed intersectionality.

3.2. Habitus, Taste, and the Queer Subculture

In *Distinction* (1984), the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu wrote about class struggle and the assertion of middle-class dominance through the construction of taste. Taste refers to personal preferences in self-articulation and consumption. Produced culturally, taste draws social distinction between different choices in consumption, style, or manner, leading to the distinction between classes. Although taste is shaped by socioeconomic conditions and educational background, it is often perceived as a "nature" rather than a cultural product.

The distinction that taste creates is first and foremost how it creates social and classed subjects:

> Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinction they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed. (Bourdieu 1984, p.6)

Bourdieu further explains the idea of taste through the concept "habitus", which he describes as "system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures… which generate and organize practices and representations" (Bourdieu 1990a, p. 53). Habitus is a mental structure which is shaped from past experiences and dispositions; it is deeply rooted in an individual's consciousness, serving as guidance for future tendencies. Bourdieu questions the belief in absolute freedom; he argues that people's decisions are limited within a certain realm of possibilities depending on their habitus. As habitus shapes the perspective of the individuals, it also binds them into an expected path of actions while at the same time legitimizes the preference of such path. Over times this practice leads to the perpetuation of "a world of already realized ends – procedures to follow, paths to take" (Bourdieu 1990a, p. 53).

As habitus guides people toward a limited path, it has the power to uphold and maintain external structures and social order. Through habitus, a person is guided to legitimize the existence of external institutions, and to "inhabit [them…], keep them in activity, [and enable them] to attain full realization" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 57). The power of habitus to legitimize and maintain structures can be understood as a form of symbolic violence, one that gives individuals in authority position the ability to name, describe, and "exert a symbolic effect" on themselves and others (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 468). Here, the theorist discusses the position of each actor in the field and how this position determines their symbolic power: while habitus confers a sense of superiority on some, it also legitimizes the oppression of those who do not occupy the same position of power. The concept "field" is described as a playing field in which each actor occupies a region that determines their

relational power based on their relationships to different forms of capital. In this case, the inquiry of taste can be understood as increasing one's symbolic power in the field: the way in which people perform classifications through taste also legitimize their own dominant status.

As Bourdieu (2001) believes in the ability of the habitus to maintain social order, he contends that in a gendered habitus, queer relationships also lead to the reproduction and continuation of gender division and heterosexual roles instead of challenging these heteronormative norms. Beverly Skeggs (2004, p.27) argues against this view: for her, the interplay of gender and sexuality, along with classed and raced intersection, creates too much complexity and ambiguity to be subsumed under Bourdieu's "terribly well-organized habitus". Skeggs suggests that it is the struggle of feminists and queer identities that leads to an inversion of norms; through the deployment and embrace of gender and sexual ambiguity, queers can refuse heteronormative values and challenge the normative gender/sexual habitus which marginalizes and stigmatizes their identity (Halperin, 2003; Skeggs, 2004). The refusal of heterosexual norms and adoption of new values means that queers can create their own "playing field," one that enforces and embraces a different ideology with certain "queer" values and "queer" practices that altogether revoke heteronormativity. It is then safe to assume that there exists a queer habitus that also formulates its own taste, its own form of symbolic violence, and its own capital which a person would need to acquire in order to gain access and "play" in the field.

The queer habitus can be characterized in various aspects. For Sheri Manuel (2005, p. 9) it is a subculture with practices for reproducing its own norms, whether through the body that contests gender norms and disrupts gender performativity, through the construction of LGBT identities as distancing from the normative, or through "the distinctive style in gestural semiology and language" (see also Adam, 1985; Butler, 1990; Lichterman, 1999; Stein & Plummer, 1994). For Lisa Duggan (2003, p.179) the queer habitus is much less revoking of heteronormative values; instead, she coins the term "homonormativity" to refer to "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormativity assumptions and institutions

but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency". Duggan (2003) points to a mainstream queer culture shaped by homonormativity, criticizing how the queer identity can be used to build a culture of consumerism which shows no signs of contestation to dominant heteronormativity. For Alison Rooke (2007), her observation of the lesbian habitus in an urban space shows how the queer identities become a marketable site to materialize taste and class distinctions, leading to the marginalization of certain queer groups.

Central to these observations is the intersection of gender, sexuality, and class, and how these identity markers can be molded together to achieve certain goals, whether it is identity politics or classed consumerism. These observations were all structured within the context of the West; for a "hybrid identity" Vietnam, the habitus of the queer youth is a concept that has not been addressed before. When these identities are studied, the focus is usually on their experiences of discrimination and prejudice in the Vietnamese society – with the aim to expose and challenge the social stigmatization against queers (see Nguyễn, Vũ & Phạm, 2012; Nguyễn, Vũ, & Lê, 2012). In this study, however, I want to position my informants as the main agents that construct their own "queer" reality through the lens of gender, sexuality and class. The focus is then shifted into how my informants construct the queer habitus, which kinds of standards that they share in this habitus, and what does a queer identity mean for them. My second question aims to address these points by analyzing the queer standards exposed throughout my interviews:

RQ 2: What constitutes the habitus shared by the Vietnamese queer youth?

It is important to note here that as an inductive study, my research questions actually arrive after my fieldwork. I came to the field with Queer Theory as the foundation of my questions, yet it took me until after gathering the data to realize that I lacked a major understanding of this theory. The two research questions above therefore were developed based on the data that I had collected and the readings that were done after the fieldwork. In the next chapter, I will explain in details the research process that leads me to the constructions of these two research questions.

4. The Research Process, Methods, Fieldwork, and Reflection

4.1. Overview of Data and Methods

Methods	Qualitative Interview (Analytical Themes)	17 cases: 5 gays, 4 lesbian, 3 transgender, 3 bisexual, 1 queer, 1 genderqueer
	Ethnography (Field Struggle)	Viet Pride (19.7.2014) Movie nights: *Madame Phung's Last Journey* (14.12.2014), *Let Hoi Decide* (22.12.2014)
Location	Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam	
Time	June 2014 – December 2014	

Table 1. Overview of Thesis Data

The data for this thesis was collected from 17 interviewing informants, including 5 gay men, 4 lesbians, 3 transgender, 3 bisexuals, 1 queer, and 1 gender-queer. All except one interview were conducted in the fieldwork period from June to December 2014 in Ho Chi Minh City; one interview was conducted in October 2013 via Skype for a class assignment and was reused in this thesis. The format of the interviews was qualitative and face-to-face, with the exception of two cases where I exchanged emails with the informants due to them being away from the city. The duration of the interview varied depending on the informants. On average, a personal interview lasted from 1 to 2 hours, while a joint interview lasted from 2 to 3.5 hours.

The interview data was interpreted and organized into analytical themes, using thematic analysis. My knowledge of the field, which was gathered during the fieldwork process, was also utilized into the construction of themes and their relationships to each other. It provided a general understanding of the field background; upon these field notes, the narratives revealed by personal interviews could be analyzed into meaningful structures. These structures were then compared against existing sociological literature to be developed into a set of analytical themes informed by theoretical knowledge.

The research project aims to study young people; the recruitment of interviewees was therefore limited by age. The informants were between 18 and 28 years old at the time the fieldwork took place. All were given a consent form which informed about their right to stop the interview at any time or to remove any information from the study. I also informed them about my use of a recording device for transcribing the interviews, and let them decide when I could start pushing the recording button. The consent form is listed under Appendix.

In the following sections, I will discuss in details the research process and fieldwork that led to the finding of these participants and my choices of analysis methods. These choices were informed by a research tradition pertinent to the feminist standpoint, which ensured that the power imbalance between the researcher and the informants was recognized and methodically challenged. This chapter will be organized into the followings: First, I will discuss the research process and timeline that led to the construction of this thesis's research questions. Second, I will provide an explanation for the use of the feminist research methodology in the study of young queer people in Vietnam, and how this research standpoint is relevant to the study. Next, I will discuss the methods of data collection – a combination of qualitative interviews and fieldwork observations – that allow me to approach how my informants construct their realities through processes of interpretations and meaning-making. Last, I will explain in more details the methods of analysis that I use in this study and how I develop analytical themes from these methods.

4.2. The Research Process and the Research Questions

My research process began in February 2014, when I wrote my first thesis proposal for my master research seminar. In this proposal, I was interested in interviewing homosexual men in Vietnam to study their experiences of stigmatization in a context where social acceptance was still negotiated and ambiguous. Not having yet a clear research question, I proceeded with a pilot interview to help me narrow the focus of my thesis plan. I was fortunate to find a gay student in one of the courses that I attended then, and he agreed to help out. The pilot

interview took place on March 6, 2014 at the Kaisa library coffee shop. My subject Ash[3] was an exchange student who originally came from a Latin-American country. Contrary to my assumption, Ash stressed that he did not have any experience of being stigmatized throughout his life. Although there was evidence from the interview to suggest that Ash had not been completely open about his sexuality (he only chose to come out to one of his parents), and thus, suggesting that stigmatization was in place, this evidence was nowhere near what I was expecting to learn from the interview. After about half an hour of the interview, I hit a roadblock. In my note, I referred to this pilot interview as a "failed" one, which revealed my overwhelming assumption about people's experiences. I also learned that I had difficulty locating and/or defining the group that I aimed to interview due to the discursive constructions of homosexuality in Vietnamese, in which the same term (homosexuality) can be used to refer to different queer identities. This realization made me think about the way in which discourse shapes the construction of identities, which eventually led me to modify my proposal and expanded my subject group from gay men to LGBT youth in Vietnam. My new research question, then, touched on identity constructions, their relations to the gender hierarchy, and the role of language in shaping identities. This was the thesis plan that went with me to the fieldwork in Ho Chi Minh City from June to December 2014. However, only a part of this plan stayed until the end.

Discussing language, my second thesis plan was focusing on queer theory, where I wrote about the definition of queer, and how sexual identities were produced by power and discourse (Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1978). The list of interview questions was developed based on this theoretical framework – with an emphasis on language and self-understanding of identities. Below are some of the questions that were used in my interview guide [4]:

1. Can you have a brief introduction about yourself: which LGBT group do you identify with and why? How do you define the other groups?

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[3] I provide pseudonym for all of my informants in this thesis to protect their identity.
[4] My interview questions were in Vietnamese. In this thesis, I presented them in English.

2. Do you know or have friends who come from the LGBT community in Vietnam? How do you refer to yourself and them? [5]

3. Are you dating someone? If yes, how do you refer to each other? Do you have "roles" in the relationship? (see full list of guiding questions in Appendix)

I ran another pilot interview on June 13th, 2014, after I had been back in Ho Chi Minh City for a week. The person who agreed to help me was a close friend, Lê, who had come out to me a few years before and was interested in my research. I had interviewed Lê earlier in October 2013 for a class assignment; the questions I asked then also revolved around his sexuality, with a focus on his "coming out" experience. On the pilot interview in June 2014, my questions were shifted to focus on discourse and the construction of identity through language. The goal was to see whether the questions that I had prepared for the official interviews "worked". At the end of this interview, Lê advised me to add two more questions into my interview guide. The first one was to ask the informants the reason they wanted to participate in the interview. The second one gave them a chance to ask me back any question related to my research. In the scheme of a feminist research, this suggestion was a move that could partially resolve the power imbalance in the context of the interview, which turned the interview into a discussion where both my informants and I could openly exchange questions and answers. This pilot interview also showed that I still needed to develop a better interview guide in order to address my research interest in discourse. I felt, again, that I hit another roadblock.

On June 16th, 2014, I had a meeting with Ms. Vu, the project officer of ICS, a non-profit organization working for LGBT rights located in Ho Chi Minh City. Ms. Vu and I had exchanged emails prior to my trip; she was interested in my research and offered to help me find participants for the interviews. In this meeting, I mentioned to her my problem with developing interview questions, and she suggested that I met with the young volunteer activists of ICS for my interviews. Ms. Vu stressed that these activists had received proper training about gender and sexuality from the organization, and a discussion with them could

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[5] Note that in Vietnamese, the way you refer to a person communicates gender and the relative age difference.

offer me suggestions to later be utilized into developing a better interview guide. I gladly accepted this offer. Initially, I planned to meet these activists to strengthen my research tools. These meetings later turned into the proper data that I decided to use for this master thesis (with the agreement of these activist informants).

Ms. Vu told me to write an email introducing my research, which she later forwarded to a group of ICS volunteer activists. The next couple days, I began to receive emails from some eager activists who wanted to meet me. Overall, there were six young people reaching out to me; some of them noted that they had been interviewed many times before. I received one email from a person who asked if she could show up with her girlfriend, who was also an activist. That was one of the two joint interviews that I had, which generated a lot of rich data. Some of these activists, after the interviews, introduced me to their queer friends who may also be interested in the research. At the same time, I also reached out to my circle of friends, who helped me find more informants for my project. This second group, generated through snowballing, constitutes mostly non-activist informants.

Here, I want to note that my interview guide continued to change after each interview meeting. The data that I collected from the beginning interviews helped to modify my later interview questions; therefore, there was a discrepancy in questions between my first and last interview. My focus on discourse was also shifted during this process; while I asked many questions on the use of language in my beginning interviews, this theme was no longer stressed later. The modification happened due to the arrival of stronger analytical themes during the process, an unexpected turn and, yet, also one that carried a defining role in the construction of this current thesis. Steinar Kvale (1996) used the "traveler" metaphor to refer to such flexibility in research, where the interviewers/travelers met with unexpected twists and turns along the journey and their research story unraveled in a rather unanticipated manner. I will discuss this idea more thoroughly in the methods section.

Last, I want to discuss how the category "queer" was later added into this thesis. Initially, my research started with gay men, which was later changed into the LGBT community. Though I used Queer Theory as my theoretical framework already in my second proposal, I

did not add "queer", as an identity category, into my research. While there are equivalent Vietnamese terms for "gay" (đồng tính nam), "lesbian" (đồng tính nữ), "bisexual" (song tính), "transgender" (chuyển giới), no such equivalent term exists for the category "queer". The difficulty to arrive at an equivalent translation may stem from the meaning of the word "queer", which can be too complicated to be pinned-down into a short-hand linguistic term. Therefore, I initially omitted the category "queer" out of the research based on the assumption that this term was not used in Vietnam. Once again, I was mistaken. The interviews exposed the notion that sexual categories developed in the West were widely used as a medium through which my informants, in Vietnam, conceptualized their identity. In most interviews, my informants used both the English and the equivalent Vietnamese terminology to describe their sexuality and gender. In some cases, the subjects even preferred being labeled with the categories in English because these categories did not evoke negative connotations as the Vietnamese terms would. The use of the category "queer" and "gender queer" eventually appeared in two interviews where the informants were both university-educated and had been exposed to Western academic terminology:

> Me: Which LGBT sub-group do you self-identify with?
> Du: I position myself as "queer" [...] I realized that I could not identify myself with the norms in any LGBT sub-group. That's how I began to think about myself as queer. There is no restriction to that category.

Du is a young activist on feminism and lesbian-related issues. She currently co-runs a Facebook page named NYNA (Nữ-yêu-nữ/Girl-love-girl Association), where she frequently translates English articles on women's rights and sexuality into Vietnamese for her readers. My later interview with another informant, Quốc, who self-identified as "gender queer" confirmed that it was a mistake on my part to leave out these queer/gender-queer identities out of my thesis proposal. Similarly to Du, Quốc is an avid reader of Western theories on sexuality and gender, who idolizes Western feminist intellectuals such as Julia Serano, Simon de Beauvoir, and bell hooks. Although the main themes of this thesis do not leave much space to discuss the narratives of my queer and gender queer

informants, I nevertheless want to include their voices into the completion of this research. Both Du and Quốc helped me to recognize and challenge many of my research presumptions while at the same time, through their answers, encouraged me to de-structure my gendered mindset and to pursue a queered research analysis. As this research proceeds, I have come to see my conceptualization of gender and sexual identities developing, fluctuating, and changing, just as how they experience with their own identity.

When I came back to Helsinki in January 2015 and began writing, I encountered some further roadblocks. Despite having a rich set of data, I still could not find a proper research question to connect through my analyses. Along with the research question deficiency, I found myself running into a problem that Eve Watson (2009, p.119) described as "inherently contradictory", when she discussed the invention of the "transgender" category and how it reinforced the notion that transgender were not real men or women, and that all people had a known and static gender. I would argue that this problem is not unique only to the transgender category, as any process of categorization would give off the impression that an identity is static and natural, which ignores the transforming power of identities in different contexts and interpretations. If I were to believe in Butler's (1990) argument that gender is fluid and performative (and this is how I want to develop my thesis), then any effort to restrict an identity within a framework, however open that seems to be, would deprive the studied subjects of their own right to self-identification and self-expression. I was one of those who committed to this mistake. Though my research is about studying the conceptualization of queer identities, I entered the field with a fixed comprehension of what each queer category was about. Here, I rely on the glossary developed from the LGBT Resource Center at the University of California, Riverside:

> Gay – Term used in some cultural settings to represent males who are attracted to males in a romantic, erotic and/or emotional sense.
> Lesbian – Term used to describe female-identified people attracted romantically, erotically, and/or emotionally to other female-identified people.
> Bisexual – A person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to males/men

and females/women. This attraction does not have to be equally split between genders and there may be a preference for one gender over others.

Transgender – A person who lives as a member of a gender other than that expected based on anatomical sex. Sexual orientation varies and is not dependent on gender identity. (Green & Peterson, 2004, p. 2, 3, 6, 9)

The problem that came with this approach was that by using categories to paint a generalization about my subjects' identities, I happened to use rigid, fixed categorical frameworks to study diversity in identities. The use of categories inadvertently injected in me the notion that some informants were doing their identities correctly, while some did not. This idea made me feel very uncomfortable during the analysis stage of this thesis, when I began to wonder if I had given myself so much power, as a researcher, over my informants, for writing about their identities as if I knew where they belonged better than they did. I found the notion of making academic assumptions about their identities not only unprofessional but also unethical. However, I could not avoid using categories when talking about my subjects, and when categories were mentioned, they inevitably came along with a general idea of what they were about. In this thesis, for example, I still refer to some people as "gay", others as "lesbian" or "transgender". The fact that I still needed to rely on categories to develop my argument (which was initially about questioning the rigid commitment to categories itself) made the whole writing process seem absurd and paralyzing. Many times, I tried to ignore the fact that I had not yet escaped a gendered mindset and still unconsciously conceptualized my ideas around a binary order, even when I was aware that it was a trap. The irony came when I saw myself in my informants, whom I critiqued for their conformity to heteronormative roles and a new reality with new forced norms. As a researcher who was not comfortable with de-gendering my analysis, I also imprisoned myself by presuming "essential" differences and the idea of a "core" identity while trying to write about something diverse, fluid, and queered. This was a dangerous mindset that led me to becoming "inherently contradictory" in my own analysis.

I remained stuck with this paradoxical problem until October 2015, when I came across Shamus Khan (2015)'s essay "Not born this way". Here, Khan challenged the essentialist conceptualization of LGBT identities. He stressed that, though this notion helped the LGBT community achieve political success it also marginalized some sub-groups of this community. After reading this article, I realized that I also clung onto the idea that an LGBT identity, just as a straight identity, was natural. This was the main trap that caused my paradoxical position, in which I tried to argue for the idea of fluidity in gender behaviors, but remained attached to the notion that there was indeed a "core" in sexuality, whether it was normative or not. This realization seemed to unlock many other conflicts that I previously encountered. I began to think about the fact that biological determinism, or "born this way" in contemporary language, had become my own argument to support queers against prejudice and discrimination, and that by emphasizing that some people were just "born" homosexual, I assumed a core characteristic about a gay identity. At the same time, this mindset prevented me from questioning the "natural" status of heterosexuality, which I aimed to challenge. All of a sudden, many questions were answered and the research question that for so long was hidden somewhere finally arrived! As I realized how easy it was to slide into categorical thinking, I thought back on my informants' emphasis on their identity being "natural", and the rigid social reality that they created or performed based on their own essentialist assumption of a natural, static queer identity. This was how I came up with my first research question, which addressed the relationship between essentialist thinking and the social performance that conceals the performative nature of itself (Butler, 1990).

The second research question came from more readings of Michel Bourdieu (1990a) and Beverly Skeggs (2004), which my supervisor Dr. Tarja Tolonen suggested. After reading some of my analysis, she directed my attention to the existence of "class" in my data. Through Skeggs' book *Self, Class, Culture,* it became apparent that identity markers such as gender, class, and sexuality are all intertwined to create different status positions, even within a marginalized community such as the Vietnamese queer youths. In this community, the existence of a queer hierarchy slowly surfaced after the interviews. My second research

question was developed based on Bourdieu's "habitus" and also addressed the connection between habitus and essentialist beliefs.

In the next sections, I will discuss in details the methodology that guides the direction of this research, the analysis methods, and address the strength, limitations, and ethical issues that come with this research process.

4.3. Into the Field: Feminist Methodology, Fieldwork, and Qualitative Interview

Feminist Methodology

Feminist research methodology refers to a framework of doing research that challenges existing social structures which validate the dominance of certain groups while marginalizing others. It questions the knowledge produced in patriarchal societies which excludes the voices of women and justifies the social oppression against women (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983; Warmbui, 2013). Criticizing traditional research for failing to address the interests and concerns of the studied subjects, feminist research stresses the significance of respecting and understanding the subjective knowledge produced by the research participants (Depner, 1981; Warmbui, 2013;). The methodology critiques the hierarchical relationship between the participants and the researchers in traditional research and promotes a non-authoritarian relationship where the informants' voice helps to shape the research process and the knowledge it produces (Oakley, 1981).

While the word "feminist" may give off the impression that this methodology focuses explicitly on structured gender inequality, I argue that any study that aims to challenge dominant forms of knowledge to bring about social justice for minority groups could utilize this methodology. To see the light of the emancipation of women from patriarchal oppression, one should not (and could not) ignore the many other aspects that construct an identity beside gender, whether it is race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, or nationality. The feminist research methodology, which represents an intellectual challenge against hierarchical modes of knowledge and social construction of identities, is a relevant framework to study the construction of "otherness", a concept which Ramazanoglu and

Holland (2002, p. 108) aptly describe as "the process of constituting/being actively constituted as 'other' in relation to 'one', rather than having a fixed, authentic or essential identity or social location". Otherness" is a social construction that labels certain identity categories as naturally subordinated to a fixed, normative, legitimate form of identity, which validates the existing social inequality and the politics of exclusion (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). The construction of "otherness" is not limited to gender, and can rather be extended to any identity. In particular, my research looks at young people who have been marginalized as "others" due to their sexuality, gender identification and class background. The use of the feminist research methodology is necessary for this project to challenge dominant discourses and normative knowledge and to provide insights into the narratives of my research subjects. However, one should note that constructing all queer identities as one unifying "otherness" is not without problem. In my study, though my informants shared the same identity as non-normative "others" that position them against heteronormativity, they still remained a rather heterogeneous group in perspectives and interests. My discourse referring to them as a community had its own risk itself, and it was later stressed in many interviews that there was no such thing as a queer community in Vietnam: the so-called "community" was fragmented into different queer categories. Even within each queer category, there was further division and marginalization.

In an article discussing gender and social exclusion, Cecile Jackson (1999) discussed how feminist theories address women's marginalization through the acknowledgement of existing divisions between women. Jackson (1999, p. 130) wrote: "Gender mediates particular forms of exclusion but does not produce categories of people included or excluded in uniform ways". Similarly, when addressing marginalization experienced by queers, one cannot ignore the fact that each queer group experience marginalization differently. Moreover, a variation in terms of class background also furthers the potential fragmentations. As Beverly Skeggs (2004) notes, the existence of class is understood not just as distinctions in terms of economic and cultural capitals, but also as a process that produces differentiation in perspectives, bodily inscription, and self-conceptualization. As a

consequence of these variations, there arises "the minority within the minority": a further marginalized group within an already marginalized community.

Given that feminist research is about representing human diversity and marginalized identities, the main challenge of this research tradition lies in the positionality of the researchers. It is essential that feminist researchers recognize their privileges in terms of race, class, gender, or sexuality and acknowledge how such privileges could contribute to the constitution of dominant discourses and a hierarchy of power in their social interaction with others (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Feminist research, therefore, is characterized by the emphasis on reflexivity – the idea that researchers should reflect on their roles in the construction of the data, whether through their positionality in the field or the nature of their relationships with the research participants (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Warmbui, 2013). It is also worth noting that the feminist researchers are in a powerful position as they represent others' lives and voices through their own interpretation of the data – a task that requires these researchers to access their own background and how that may compromise their understanding of the stories told.

In my research, I entered the fieldwork with an acknowledgment of my privilege in terms of sexuality and gender identity, which positions me as an "outsider" of the community I try to study and represent. First, I am a heterosexual, gender normative researcher who aims to represent queers, a community marginalized by the status of my own sexual and gender identity. Second, I am also privileged in terms of social class and educational background, and I come to the field using Western knowledge and theories to study a non-Western population. Third, my role as the researcher and the interviewer, gives me the power to re-construct the conversations that I had with my informants. As Dorothy Smith (1998) notes, the power of the researcher can be exercised through the act of representing people's lives with text, and through the decision to include or exclude certain parts of the interviews out of the study. As an example, in the construction of this thesis, there are narratives that I leave out to maintain a thorough and consistent structure. In addition, the interviews are

conducted in Vietnamese while this thesis is written in English, which brings into questions whether my interpretation and translation of the data represents its original meanings.

The acknowledgement of this imbalance power structure between my informants and me-the researcher led me to adopt different strategies to promote an egalitarian research relationship, and to ensure that the knowledge produced by this research was co-constructed by both parties. Barbara Sherman Heyl (2001) discusses this co-construction of knowledge while writing about ethnographic interviews, stressing that whatever data the informants decide to share in the interviews depends on their relationship with the interviewer and the interview situation. My goal for the interviews was to construct a safe space and to develop a mutual trust with my informants, which required me to be as open and flexible as I could. One of my strategies was to let my informants choose the location where the interviews would take place. Elwood and Martin (2000) note that the interview location is a site through which spatial meanings and power relations are produced, and that if the research allows for the flexibility in choosing an interview location, such flexibility should be reflected as data that communicates about the community one aims to study. Previous studies also discuss how the choice of interview sites may help to counteract the power hierarchy between the interviewers and interviewees (Longhurst, 1996; Nagar, 1997; Oberhauser, 1997), how the sites determine whether participants are comfortable sharing confidential information (McDowell, 1998), and how the power discrepancy between first-world researcher and third-world participants should be acknowledged (Moss, 1995; Nagar, 1997). I found it important, in my study, to let the participants choose the specific location both for their convenience and for generating a safe, open atmosphere that would facilitate the discussion, given that my research topic touches on sensitive areas of their personal lives. Before the meeting, I asked my informants to pick a quiet public location suitable for the interviews, and they suggested different coffee shops depending on the location of their home or workplace. Ho Chi Minh City, where the field work took place, is acknowledged for its coffee-drinking culture, and coffee shops are popular social venues for meeting people and hanging out with friends or family. A meeting at a coffee shop generates an

easy-going and friendly atmosphere, the kind of research environment that I believe will facilitate thoughtful discussion.

Another strategy that I adopted to address the power imbalance was to appear as an easy-going, friendly researcher during the interviews. I figured that if my informants perceived me as a friend, they would be more inclined to open up about sensitive areas of their lives. In some cases, I noticed that my status as a researcher studying in Finland initially created a wall of distance and even intimidation. Therefore, throughout the process I appeared as a casual, non-professional, (sometimes even playful) researcher, who would use cultural slangs and jokes to alleviate the tension of the interview and create a non-threatening environment. As a result, I have established relationships with many of my informants after the interview process and stayed in touch with them.

The last strategy that I used to address the power imbalance in this research led to some major changes in the construction of my thesis. This happened as I flexibly morphed my research approach along the interview process based on the data and suggestions given by my informants. I will discuss this strategy more thoroughly in the next section.

Qualitative Interview

Although feminist research is not limited into any particular method of data collection, feminist researchers frequently use qualitative in-depth interviews as a data collection technique (Warmbui, 2013). This form of interviews provide a safe and private space for the research participants to talk about their feelings and experiences, which in turn gives the researchers insights into the way in which their participants construct meanings of their social reality. Warren (2001) distinguishes this method from survey interview in the sense that qualitative interview is rather constructionist than positivist, in which the researchers are interested in the interpretation of reality rather than reality itself. In this form of interview, informants are seen as active meaning-makers instead of passive participants who simply answer from a set of strict, guided questions (Hostein & Gubrium, 1995). As a result, the data collected from qualitative in-depth interviews is particularly rich,

contextual, and personal, which offers the researchers access to the marginalized voices that most of the time are silenced or unheard (Hesse-Biber, 2006). This data collection method can also be seen as having a therapeutic effect in which the research participants can express their feelings and share personal stories, knowing that the researchers seek to listen and to understand (Nelson, Onwuegbuzie, Wines, & Frels, 2013).

The choice of qualitative interviews to pursue this research somehow comes naturally to me. First, this method gives me insights into the subjective, interpretative experiences of my research participants as young queer people. Research on queers in Vietnam is rather an understudied area, and qualitative interviews provide a powerful tool to get a detailed look into the life stories of these young people. Second, one cannot overlook the therapeutic function of qualitative interviews on participants of a community that is deemed marginalized and stigmatized. During my fieldwork, I tried to construct the interview as a safe space in order to encourage my participants to feel comfortable while discussing sensitive issues that matter to their lives.

Last but not least, qualitative interview comes with the ability to "wander". Kvale (1996, p. 4) draws a powerful metaphor that compares the experience of the qualitative researcher to that of a traveler, in which the interviewer researchers "wander along with the local inhabitants" and lead the informants to tell about their lives through being receptive and accommodating to their own personal interest. Qualitative interview, with its open-ended questions, makes it possible for the researchers to be flexible and adapting to the conditions provided, instead of having to guide all participants through the same rigid path as other systematic methods would (Kvale, 1996). Accordingly, each travel path will surface differently depending on the person the researcher is travelling with. In the case of my study, I benefited from this ability to "wander" which allowed me to flexibly develop and refine my research questions during the fieldwork process. I came into the field with a general idea of what my thesis was about, and through talking and discussing ideas with my informants (and letting them take me on their own paths), the main themes of my study were gradually developed. In a way, I was also more comfortable taking this approach,

which let my informants participate in the process of constructing the interviews and ensured that they had a voice in the study. As a continuation to the feminist research tradition, I wanted to construct the interview as "expressly egalitarian" (Warren, 2001, p.95).

The content and structure of each interview I had, therefore, were unique in the sense that they were not tied to the same format. In some interviews, legal matters and the future of the Vietnamese queer community were the main focus of the conversation, which created a serious, frustrating, and even depressing tone throughout the interview. In some others, the conversations were light-hearted and filled with laughter as I casually made some funny remarks through my questions to create a friendly, comfortable atmosphere for my closeted respondents to open up about their lives and interpersonal relationships. This same flexibility was also present when it came to adjusting the voice of my perspective when asking questions. Warren (2001) notes that the perspective of the researcher is usually linked to their own discipline; in my case, it was the sociological perspective that I relied on, one that regarded gender and sexuality as socially constructed categories. During the fieldwork, whether I chose to openly voice this perspective or not depended on the person I was talking to. In some interviews with the activist-informants who had received theoretical training from ICS, I asked questions that challenge their essentialist views on masculinity and femininity. When I talked to other respondents who were not as theoretically inclined, however, I tried not to let my perspective over-ride their own meaning-making process, and prioritized their perspective over mine throughout the interview.

Fieldwork Observation

This research project incorporated some of my observation notes which took place throughout the fieldwork. As Thorpe (2008) asserts, field notes should not be limited to the setting where the researcher is in contact with the informants; instead, it can be utilized throughout the research process. In my study, I jotted down notes in different stages of the research as a form of diary, without knowing at first that these observation notes could be used in the construction of this thesis later. Through the advice and comments of my

supervisor, I later realized how I was oblivious to the "insider" advantages that I had in this field, which allowed me to observe and engage in the field in different ways. Most notably, I am a Vietnamese, born and grown up in Ho Chi Minh City. Doing fieldwork in Vietnam therefore to me felt like coming home rather than going to a strange research site. In relation to speaking the local language, I also had the local knowledge that kept me up to date with the ongoing cultural productions related my research interests, such as slangs, LGBTQ movies, and community projects. In addition, my young age was beneficial to studying young people; in many cases, my interviewees perceived me as a friend rather than a researcher and opened up to me about issues that were culturally sensitive, such as their sexual experiences. My contact with these informants also did not end after the interviews. The experiences varied, ranging from getting friend requests and messages on Facebook and having lunch/dinner with my informants immediately after the interviews, to being invited to a birthday party, a movie night, and a discussion on a lesbian-community project a few weeks later. I also had a chance to participate in a Pride event in Ho Chi Minh City in July 2014. As a result, my research data was not limited to the qualitative interviews but rather extended to these observations outside of the interview settings.

My data was also enriched by the help and interactions off-the-record that I received during the fieldwork process. First, I received assistance from my friend Lê, who gave me a ride to the interview sites and sometimes acted as my research assistant in five interviews when the meeting time fitted with his schedule. The first interview that I had him present was one where I talked with a couple, and was afraid that I may not be able to note down everything that was going on when interviewing two informants at the same time. In all interviews that Lê was assisting, I asked my informants ahead if they were okay with his presence, and their responses were all positive. Lê was very helpful in the interviews; he noted down the informants' answers along with his observations on their tone of voice, gestures, and facial expression. Sometimes he also suggested some interesting questions. When he rode me home from the interview site, we would discuss our interpretations of the informants' answers, and sometimes Lê's reactions to these answers were treated as data itself.

Second, I received help from the gatekeepers to find my informants. Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) characterize gatekeepers as leaders or officials who have access to members of an institution or a community; in my case, I use the term "gatekeeper" to refer to any person who gives me access to interviewees that otherwise would not have been possible. The first gatekeeper of my study was Ms. Vu from ICS, who forwarded my contact to the volunteer activists of the organization. Ms. Vu was a well-known, respected official of ICS, and her introduction was vital to help me get the email responses from my informants. The second gatekeeper was Vy, a childhood friend who lived in the same neighborhood with me. When knowing about my research, she offered to connect me with her close friend Hoa, who was a closeted lesbian. Hoa agreed to meet me only with the presence of Vy at the meeting. The interview evolved rather spontaneously: after I went through the consent form and the purpose of the research with Hoa, she made a phone call to invite their mutual friend Sen, also a lesbian, to join the interview. It was an unexpected development, one that I was thankful for. Both Hoa and Sen were reserved about their sexuality, and if Vy was not present at the interview site, or if they were not all there together as a group, Hoa and Sen might not have felt safe and comfortable enough to open up.

The fieldwork also involved observations at cinema theaters that showed movies and documentaries related to queer issues. During the time of my fieldwork, two film productions central on the queer identities came out and attracted a lot of attention from the Vietnamese public. The first one, *Để Hội Tính* (English Translation: Let Hoi Decide), was a comedy movie about a male-to-female (MTF) transgender. This movie was a hit because it was, simply, entertaining, yet it was also controversial as the laughter it triggered was based upon the development of the main character, MTF Hội, portrayed as a person obsessed with men and with sex. I watched this movie with two informants of my study, Chi[6] and Lê. An

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[6] After interviewing Chi, I introduced her to my gay friend Lê and they began to bond over the experience of being abused and rejected by their family because of their sexuality. Seeing them bonding was a joy for me; I remember sitting in the noodle shop observing how they shared stories and finished each other's sentences, and feeling that we definitely belonged in this small circle. It was also this bond between Chi and Lê which convinced me that if there had been less separation among the Vietnamese queer youths, this community could have achieved a lot more, both politically and culturally.

activist for the lesbian community, Chi was furious after watching the movie. She critiqued the movie production for the stigmatizing portrayal of transgender people which contributed to the prejudice and discrimination against this marginalized population. Chi's reaction was not unique; a few days after the premiere, *Để Hội Tính* received a wave of backlash from the LGBTQ community in Ho Chi Minh City (Lương, 2014; Việt, 2014). However, this movie continued to be adored by the Vietnamese public despite its stigmatizing representation of transgender, mainly the male-to-female group.

The second queer-related film production that I watched during my fieldwork was a documentary named *Madam Phung's Last Journey*. The production, which had previously won the Vietnamese Golden Kite Award for Best Documentary Film, illustrated the daily life of transgender male-to-female performers who travelled around the country and entertained rural audiences for a living (Van In, Blum, & Nguyễn, 2014). This documentary tackled the reality of how the Vietnamese law failed to provide identity recognition and legitimate employment for transgender people, who ended up living as "ghosts" in the society. *Madam Phung's Last Journey* portrayed transgender people as simply people with the desire to be loved and recognized, and it gave an intimate view into their daily loneliness and suffering. It did not portray them as sex addicts or used the transgender identities for comedic effect, which was considered a positive change for both the transgender group and the queer community in Vietnam. Some informants, during the interviews, mentioned this documentary as the kind of productions they wanted to represent the queer community for its sincere, stigma-free depiction of reality. However, my experience in the cinema showed that a population of the Vietnamese public still regarded transgender issues as entertaining-triggering. Many people cracked out laughing during scenes where the characters made obscene jokes to cover their bitterness with life. I found it difficult to laugh at such moments, and it struck me by surprise to see how the majority of the audiences that day found those scenes amusing. This may have to do with how transgender people are frequently used for comedic relief in Vietnamese film productions (Mai, 2014).

During the weekend of July 18 to 21, 2014, ICS organized Viet Pride, an annual event that aimed to celebrate the diversity of queer identities. The event took place in Ho Chi Minh City and had different activities: a talk-show with the press and law makers concerning equal rights for queers, a conference hosted by queer speakers, queer-themed plays and movies, an outdoor festival, and a pride parade. I was particularly interested in the conference, which included four 45-minute presentations on queer-related issues. Attending this conference, I aimed to learn more about the issues deemed important to this community as well as to recruit more participants for my research. During the conference break, I talked to some participants of the event, asked them about the possibility to take part in an interview, and received some email contacts. They all seemed interested in the study while in the event; however, when I contacted this email list later, there was only one person who responded and agreed to meet. This change of heart showed me how space regulates decisions and behaviors. As the event was created by and for queers, it constructed a safe space for these young people to gather and express their identities, which consequently made them become more open to my interview invitation. To use Bourdieu's (1990) term, the event constructed its own "field" where certain dispositions were encouraged and recognized; because it was a Pride event, there was an emphasis on showing and celebrating the non-normative self. Away from the event, that safe space was gone and we entered another "field" where the choice of privacy was prioritized, and these young people reverted back to being skeptical individuals who could not give away their private information just as freely.

The same incidence happened when I contacted a friend who I knew was bisexual for an interview. When I first approached him, he was very interested in my research. We set up a date and a place to meet, yet he changed his mind just one day before the agreed meeting day. Despite my effort to convince him that everything would be kept confidential, he was scared that his private information would be leaked out and that his parents would learn about his sexual orientation which, to use his words, "would put me in deep trouble". Since he was no longer comfortable with the interview, I decided not to trouble him any longer. This particular incidence helped me to shape the question concerning the process of coming

out in the interview guide, and how family backgrounds could be an indication of whether coming out was an option for the queer youths in Vietnam.

Overall, my fieldwork helped to provide insightful knowledge into the study of the queer community in Vietnam. Although this thesis mainly utilizes the interview data, I also incorporate some of my experiences and observations in the field to give a more well-rounded depiction of this community and its fragmentation of interests and perspectives. The field notes also show how the conceptualization of identity can fluctuate and change through exposure to new knowledge.

4.4 After the Field: How I analyze my data

As previously written, the data used in this thesis was gathered from both the qualitative interviews and my observations in the field. While the interviews offered many suggestions and concepts for theme development, my fieldwork experiences helped to provide a general background image upon which the interview data were interpreted. The themes were later finalized using existing theoretical literature. The steps are demonstrated below:
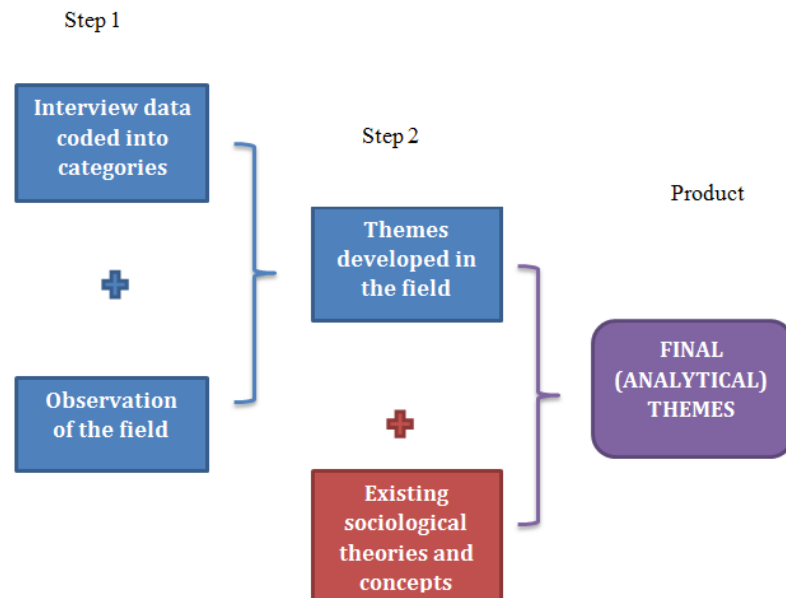

Figure 1. Analytical Procedure

In step one, I use thematic analysis to extract different codes from the interview data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis that requires the researchers to get familiarized with the original data to identify a set of codes that leads to the development of themes among these codes. My familiarization with the interview data was developed from being the interviewer to being the transcriber and translator of each interview. I also used my field observation to inform my process of developing codes and themes.

I chose thematic analysis from a number of reasons. First, thematic analysis requires the researchers to look into both the manifested and the implied meanings behind the text, which results in a deeper conceptualization of the data compared to other qualitative techniques (Guest, MacQueen, & Narney, 2012). Second, thematic analysis works well in terms of flexibility; because it is not limited to any epistemological foundation, there is a variation of ways in which the method can be applied (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Last but not least, it can be used both inductively (content-driven) or deductively (theory-driven) based on the preference of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Howitt & Crammer, 2011).

During step two, I applied thematic analysis inductively. After gathering data from the field and developing my first set of themes, I then compared them against existing literature to finally arrive at the final analytical themes. Although my analysis is data-driven, theory still has a significant role in the construction of my final themes and in how I organize the data that I present in this thesis. The themes organized in the following three chapters are therefore informed by theory and the research questions, focusing on gender performativity, habitus, and class hierarchy.

In closing, the themes presented in this thesis are analyzed using thematic analysis and fieldwork observation. Then the themes are finalized by being compared against existing sociological literature and concepts. In the next three chapters, I will provide different analytical themes from my data by applying these methods into the analysis of the interview data, together with my observation notes about the field.

5. Analytical Chapter 1: *Performing an Essentialist Queer Identity*

In 2011, American singer Lady Gaga released a hit song named "Born this way", which she dedicated to her queer fans. "Born this way" celebrates diversity in identities; it legitimizes differences as an inborn, natural feature of the self and therefore, should be respected. The song talks about embracing individual identity and loving oneself as something to be achieved, and that one should not "hide in regrets". Its chorus quotes: "I'm beautiful in my way 'cause God makes no mistake... I was born this way."(Metrolyrics, n.d)

"Born this way" soon became one of those beloved gay anthems with positive potentials for the quest to equality of the LGBTQ community. The song travelled globally and was well received by many other countries, turning it into a global hit. Vietnam was also one of the countries that used "Born this way" to advocate for queer rights. The song was heard in two Pride events in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City in 2014. Its "born this way" message was used to argue against the wide-spread, stigmatizing belief in Vietnam which considered homosexuality to be a selfish choice and a Western-oriented lifestyle.

As much as "Born this way" contributes to the success of queer-right activism, the message of the song is not immune to critique from scholars. Shamus Khan (2015), a Columbia University sociologist, expresses concern on how gay right activists rely on biological determinism to promote their cause. Khan argues that sexuality, same as race or gender, is also a social construction, and that to believe that sexuality is innate means to ignore how social environment can "mold" sexual desire into meaningful categories. Khan warns against the marginalizing effect of the "born this way" message onto some subgroups of the queer community, such as transsexual and transgender people. The author considers biological determinism "a false and dangerous argument" which may help activists advance their political cause at the cost of further marginalizing a population that is already marginalized, and stresses that one needs to acknowledge how sexuality is a social product in order to support the queer community.

Writing this thesis chapter, I do not by any means attempt to take part in the debate on whether sexuality is biological or social. I, however, acknowledge that biological

determinism, or the notion that one is "born this way", is a unified perspective shared by my interview informants. This leads me to question: How does the perception that sexuality is innate shape my informants' conceptualization of identity? How does essentialism, as a construction, contribute to the way my informants make meanings to their identity as well as other queer identities? What would be the impact that the Vietnamese local adaptations of this notion manifest on its queer youth? These are the questions that I aim to address in this chapter. I will also discuss how this construction serves as a strategy through which my informants negotiate their queerness, and how this leads to further division and marginalization within this queer community.

5.1 "I was born this way": Biological determinism in queer identity politics

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

The "hope" that my friend Lê was referring to was the hope that his sexual orientation could be morphed from one category (homosexuality) into another (bisexuality) – with the latter being a more acceptable choice. Being a bisexual, Lê argued, would give him more options and open up the possibility to be "normal". However, after years of "practices" through watching pornographic films, Lê was convinced that the method did not work; eventually, he came to terms with his sexuality as a gay man.

The struggle that we saw in the quote above, one that shadowed over many years of a person's life, was not at all unique in my gathered pool of data. There were different forms of struggle to acknowledge one's "true" sexuality or gender identity, through periods of depression, suicidal thoughts, try-and-fail practices, and a general feeling of displacement

and alienation from society. These struggles all came down to the idea of knowing self and finally accepting that one's identity was different from the norm. The very same struggle also served as an emphasis that sexuality and gender identity were not choices; instead, they were inherent, in-born features that would remain the same to the end. Consistency became the key in my informants' coming-out narrative, in which their differences were spotted out or manifested from an early age:

> Hiếu (23, trans-man): I have never thought of myself as a girl. When I began to have some understanding about gender, about 4 or 5 years old, I often wondered why I had this body part but not the other, why I had to dress in girly clothes, why I had to grow long hair instead of having short hair.

> Lê (23, gay): In preschool time I would molest my male friends (laugh). I had the childish curiosity of the male organ […] Living in my grandma's house with my aunts and uncles I would definitely have seen stuff. I would peep at the hole in the bathroom sometimes as my uncles were in for shower. Or I saw them changing. They were in their twenties. And at school I would literally get in my male friends' pants and played it until it got hard (laugh) and they didn't know a thing.

Whether my informants learned about their queerness through their incompatibility with gender roles or their curiosity with certain sexual organs from a young age, these behaviors all indicated a notion that their identity was static and natural. A previous study on LGBT street children (age 14 to 18) in Ho Chi Minh City reached similar findings: these children recognized their gender identity from early childhood, when they had the desire to wear clothes made for the opposite sex (Nguyễn, Nguyễn, Lê , Vũ, & Lương, 2012). Here, the young age implies innocence and a lack of choice, when desire is believed to arise as an inescapable part of identity rather than a later product molded by social circumstances. These conceptualizations of identities are shaped by the idea that identity is consistent and natural rather than voluntary choice, a notion called "biological determinism".

In the field of queer-right activism, biological determinism has proven to be an effective strategy to achieve public acceptance and equal rights for queers (Epstein, 1987; Khan, 2015). It is, also, a prevalent ideology in popular discourse when homosexuality is discussed (Weber, 2012). Previous research studies showed that essentialist beliefs about the homosexual identity were associated with tolerance and a pro-gay attitude from the public (Haslam & Levy, 2006; Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2002; Herek & Capitanio, 1995). More specifically, the notion that homosexuality was biological, determined early in life, and difficult to change corresponded to greater acceptance to a gay and lesbian identity (Haslam et al., 2002; Hegarty & Pratto, 2001). In Vietnam, biological determinism has also been adopted by activist organizations such as ISEE and ICS as their main argument for queer rights, which has been effective in a society that emphasizes social harmony, collective needs and the dutiful roles for each gender.

Let's revisit the Vietnamese public perception about queer people and their connection to both essentialism and constructionism. The early Vietnamese discussion on homosexuality (or queerness)[7] proposed the notion that "real" homosexuals were rare while the rest were "fake" (Blanc, 2005; Colby et al. 2003; Phạm, 2013). This claim can explain the two main anti-gay arguments present in Vietnamese contemporary discourse. The first argument disqualifies homosexuality because it is considered not "real", authentic, or essential, but a choice and a lifestyle originated from the West (Lê, 2003; Phạm, 2013). This notion is not unique to Vietnam; many other Asian communities also contend that homosexuality is a "White man's disease" (Chua, 1999; Fung, 1996; Poon, 2005). In the second argument, homosexuality is considered real but only because it is a disease that needs to be cured (Lê, 2003; Phạm, 2013). While both arguments delegitimize queerness, they rely on two different ideologies. The first argument utilizes what Epstein (1987, p.11) described as "folk constructionism", the idea that sexuality can be affected by outside influences. Folk constructionism can be used to attack queerness by labeling queer people as "victims of false consciousness", and it becomes a threat to the legitimation of queer existence

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[7] In early Vietnamese literature about queers, "đồng tính/ đồng tính luyến ái" (direct translation: homosexuality) carried the same meanings as queers.

(Epstein, 1987, p. 22). The second argument, on the contrary, resolves to "folk essentialism" (Epstein, 1987, p. 11). Here, queers are stigmatized in the sense that their identity and desires are considered real but definitely not "normal" and need to be fixed (cured). In other words, this perspective labels queerness to be both natural *and* wrong.

In contemporary queer politics, social activists turn to essentialism (biological determinism) to legitimize the queer identity (Epstein, 1987; Weber, 2012). They argue against the notion that queerness is a disease and, instead, embrace it as a form of diversity (Epstein, 1987; Phạm, 2013). This strategic use of essentialism is reflected in Foucault (1978, p. 101)'s concept *reverse discourse*, where "homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturality' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified". Through the same medicalized discourse, essentialism is used strategically to normalize same-sex relationships and legitimize homosexuality under the rationality that argues: it is natural; therefore it is normal (Epstein, 1987; Weber, 2012).

Though Foucault's theory looks at sexuality in the West, nevertheless it carries implications and explanations to contemporary queer politics in Vietnam. In my observation, this may have to do with how the Western model of sexuality and gender identity has been applied by activist organizations in the attempt to promote rights and equality for Vietnamese queers. In Vietnam, biological determinism also works well as a strategy to help these organizations advance their cause. However, as Epstein (1987) argues, using essentialism as a political strategy also has its own problems and implications. In the next section, I will discuss the issues that come with the essentialist conceptualization of identity and how it can be problematic when used to explain the queer identity.

5.2. The Queer Reverse Discourse: Biological Determinism and Homonormativity
I began my interviews by asking my informants to introduce themselves, including the queer group that they identify with and the reason why. Since half of these respondents were activists for the non-profit organization ICS, they had previously received training from the organization regarding the description of each queer category. They offered me

what I would describe as a Western, academic answer for my identification question, making distinction among the following concepts: "sexed body", "gender identity", and "sexual orientation". The definition of each queer category then follows these concepts strictly: for example, a gay man would be someone who has a male body, thinks of himself as a man, and only develops attraction for men. Although gender expression was not frequently mentioned in the answers, I noticed that there was an expectation for consistency between gender identity and gender expression in their answers. They discussed the way a person appeared in public, and how the way one walked, talked, or dressed would be a reflection of gender identity.

ICS's model to "train" these young individuals on the tripartite system of sexed body/gender/sexuality seemed helpful in terms of debunking compulsory heterosexuality and gender roles norms. During the interviews, most activist informants expressed a sense of pride in their knowledge about queer issues and their ability to challenge traditional gender norms. However, they also showed a strict conformity to their categorical membership. This suggested that there existed a set of standards reserved for each queer category, and the failure to meet these standards would make one's membership become questionable. I then decided to take a closer look at how each queer group was conceptualized in the training materials provided by their activist organization. Below is an excerpt from a booklet made by the ICS, discussing the coming-out experience:

Q: Is homosexuality a "choice"?

A: *Sexual orientation and gender identity are not choices. Similarly, a person is not heterosexual, nor right-handed, nor brown-eyed by choice*. The choice lies in whether this person is willing *to explore themselves, to live true to themselves* and to other people.

Q: Are heterosexual people the "normal" ones?

A: When people refer to heterosexuals as "normal", it creates the impression that homosexuals are "not normal". *In reality, different sexual orientations exist naturally, normally, and equally*. The fact that *LGBT people are the minority* and that society does not have sufficient knowledge about them does not mean that they

are any less normal than the majority (heterosexual people). (ICS, 2013, pp. 14-15, my translation and emphasis in italics)

This excerpt comes from a section discussing the common misconceptions and prejudice against LGBT people. The Q&A format was used to easily convey the message: The question gave examples of a common "misconception" and the answer provided knowledge to counteract with such. In the extract above, I italicized phrases and sentiments that conceptualized sexuality and gender identity, whether fully or just partially. The first Q&A, for example, counteracted the belief that sexuality and gender identity could be chosen. The writer then compared sexuality with bodily features such as eye color, implying that such differences occurs through natural diversity and therefore should be seen as legitimate and equal. In this same answer, the writer brought up the notion of "exploring and living true" to oneself, suggesting that sexuality or gender identity, as an inherent feature of self, could sometimes be hidden deep underneath, and it took courage to "dig" them out and be "true" to them. Similarly, the second Q&A also reinforced the notion that (homo-)sexuality was natural and normal.

The presence of essentialist discourse can be easily spotted in both answers above. These are typical examples for Foucault's (1978) reverse discourse, when medicalized categories such as LGBT are depicted as natural and normative in order to gain legitimacy and public support. These answers also reflect Foucault's (1978) theory on bio-power and the way in which this form of power is operated. For example, the notion that one should explore and find one's "true self" reinforces the Freudian idea that (non-normative) sexuality is a secret, a "truth of our being" that needs to be liberated from repression. This is a manifestation of the repressive hypothesis that Foucault (1978) explicitly critiqued, as it leads to conventional practices that monitor and manage sexuality through classifications and in turn maintains bio-power. The effort of "liberating" queers inadvertently classifies this community into categories (such as LGBTQ) depending on *how* they are different from the norm, and transforms both sexuality and gender into a form of identity being.

There are, of course, both potentials and problems that arise from this liberation approach. On one hand, one cannot deny the activist promise of this approach in the context of Vietnam (in fact, the recent changes in the Vietnamese law already reflect a more accepting environment). As a Confucian society that emphasizes familial responsibilities and the lineage continuation, Vietnam has little space for those whose identities manifest on the margins of its traditions and gender norms (Blanc, 2005; Feng et al. 2012).The belief that queers "fake it" just to stand out or to satisfy their sexual lifestyle associates queerness with a conscious, selfish, individualistic choice, and places these identities at direct opposition with the Confucian ideology that emphasizes social harmony, collective needs, and dutiful roles for each gender. Using biological determinism to explain queerness therefore can resolve this hostility and tension: when these identities are considered "born this way" and therefore "lack of control", it invites sympathy and acceptance rather than judgment. This strategy also echoes the global dichotomy present in pro/anti-gay debate, in which the pro-gay takes up the position of biological determinism, while anti-gay groups characterize same-sex desire as a sinful choice to argue against LGBTQ equality (Weber, 2012).

On the other hand, the notion of liberating queerness out of repression undoubtedly reinforces and perpetuates the classifications of different queer groups. Classification can be politically useful; as Epstein (1987, p. 138) argued: "Identities are phenomena that permit people to become acting 'subjects' who define who they are in the world". In other words, identity classification gives people tool to exercise their agency and to unite against an existing social structure that oppresses them. However, classification also comes with an implication, one that Foucault (1984, p. 166) discussed in an interview:

> Well, if identity is only a game, if it is only a procedure to have relations, social and sexual-pleasure relationships that create new friendships, it is useful. But if identity becomes the problem of sexual existence, and if people think that they have to "uncover" their "own identity," and that their own identity has to become the law, the principle, the code of their existence; if the perennial question they ask is "Does this thing conform to my identity?" then, I think, they will turn back to a kind of

ethics very close to the old heterosexual virility [...] We must not exclude identity if people find their pleasure through this identity, but we must not think of this identity as an ethical universal rule.

Foucault's answer in this interview reflects how labels can be both liberating and constraining. While labels give people the opportunity to find their belonging in new social relationships, they can also serve as possible restrictions if the subjects choose to wear such labels as their "code of existence". The conformity to labels, consequently, can lead people to create a new social reality within which they are trapped by new rules and codes of conduct. In particular, Foucault predicts that the conformity to sexual labels could lead people to pursue a new system of ethics operated under the spirit of heterosexuality. In a gay or lesbian relationship, conformity to this "old heterosexual virility" is hardly ideal, if not straight-out ironic.

Here, I want to return to the point made about biological determinism and how it, as a widespread ideology that explains queer identities, can carry paradoxical implications. While biological determinism certainly makes public acceptance become more achievable for queers, this strategy only works insofar as it does not challenge heteronormativity and its institutions, such as the binary gender roles and compulsive heterosexuality. In other words, biological determinism works as a strategy because it functions at the same time as a way to reinforce the dominant status of heterosexuality as the righteous, natural sexuality. Biological determinism paves way for a new kind of gay politics that normalizes homosexual relationships through the exercise of heteronormativity, a concept that Lisa Duggan (2003) coined as "homonormativity". In this effect, conformity to the heteronormativity becomes the new norm in a queer relationship, and whether a queer relationship or identity is "worthy" of social acceptance is determined by how closely it imitates the "heterosexual virility" (Flores, 2013; Foucault, 1984, p. 166). Shannon Weber (2012) recently developed the concept "biological homonormativity" out of Duggan's "homonormativity", where she referred to the hegemonic use of biological determinism in

contemporary pro-gay discourse and how it serves to exclude certain fluid queer identities from participating and representing their experiences.

Though Duggan develops the term "homonormativity" out of the neo-liberal context of the US, I have found a similar trend manifesting in the queer culture of Vietnam throughout my data which gives rise to the development of a queer habitus and hierarchy. Biological determinism is also at place in the construction of this habitus, in which the only possible explanation for a queer identity is through variation in biology. Biological homonormativity as a discourse is prevalent both in the way my informants construct their queer identity, their relationships, and other queer identities. The implication that arises from this discourse, as Foucault (1984) predicted, can be observed in the way my informants conform to a new set of standards that resembles the same old heteronormative gender binary. In the next section, I will discuss the data from the interviews that reveal this set of standards in conceptualizing the queer identity and the queer relationships.

5.3. Biological homonormative discourse on the queer discovery, identity and relationships

Narratives using biological determinism and homonormativity were prevalent throughout my interviews. I divide them into three groups: self-discovery, identity, and relationships.

Self-discovery of queerness

The self-discovery narrative (some of its examples have been showed in the previous sections) characterizes the process of finding and recognizing the "true" sexual/gender identity. As previously stated, many answers pointed back to their childhood, when they "already" felt that they were different. It could be a vague, unexplainable feeling:

> Anh (28, trans-man): The discovery was a process. Ever since I was a kid I already felt different, but I could not identify what really made me feel that way. I just knew that I was different.

Or it can be a specific desire for self-expression incompatible with their assigned gender roles, or their attraction to same-sex friends:

Hà (23, trans-woman): Back then, in kindergarten, I saw my female friends wearing dresses to school and I wanted to wear dresses too. I even imagined that if I acted up, my teacher would punish me by making me wear a dress (laugh).

Minh (23, gay): Around the time when I was in grade 2 or 3, I liked looking at some cute male classmates. I did not know what "gay' was at that point, I just knew that I liked looking and playing with them.

The majority of my homosexual respondents reported going through a process of trying to make sense of their sexual preference and to make sure that it was not just "a phase". They collected information on homosexuality through different means: talking to people, reading newspapers, or doing searches on the internet. As a result, most of them only began to identify with a gay/lesbian identity at a grown-up age, usually when they were in high school or university:

Mi (18, lesbian): I have only been totally sure of my sexuality since grade 12. Before that I already had feelings for my female friends, but I only thought I liked them because they were cute and nice. I thought I would still be attracted to boys.

In some case, the realization was often met with feelings of denial when they engaged in practices to resist their sexual preference and "train" themselves toward heterosexuality:

Nam (26, gay): I only accepted myself around age 18 or 19. Before that I did not dare to accept, I was afraid, I was in some sort of denial. Like I would try to get a girlfriend, or when I looked at sexy pictures I would try to focus on the female model rather than the male one. I tried every way I could to resist the fact that I was gay.

Nam (and Lê, quoted earlier in this chapter) took the matter into their own hands and took resistance to another level. They both attempted to suppress their sexual preference by training themselves to get aroused at the female bodies. However, such practices were proven to be obsolete: their sexual attraction to men remained the same as time went by.

Eventually, they began to accept their sexuality and embrace their identity, which Nam referred to as his "nature".

The process of taking time to confirm their sexuality and/or to resist it was undoubtedly a reaction to the widespread cultural notion that considered homosexuality to be a "sinful" choice or a temporary lifestyle (Phạm, 2013; Weber, 2012). As previously discussed, discourse using folk constructionism delegitimizes homosexuality (and by extension, queerness) through characterizing it as a spontaneous, chaotic attraction. The common reaction against this stigmatizing construction of (homo-)sexuality would be to "slide to the opposite extreme: they assert that there is something real about their identity, and then try to locate that felt reality in their genes, or their earliest experience, or their mystical nature" (Epstein, 1987, p. 25). Both the emphasis on feeling different from a young age and the reported failure to change sexual attraction through different practices play an important role in "locat[ing] that felt reality": they give evidence to support the notion that identity is indeed essential, consistent, and unchangeable. Consequently, "nature" became a typical word used by my informants when they conceptualized their sexual or gender identity.

The Queer Identity

Barbara Ponse (1978), in a book discussing the lesbian identities and the coming-out experience, wrote about the human effort to construct consistency in their narrative. As a result, the coming-out experience is used as a phase through which homosexual people "handl[e] breaks and discontinuities in their biography" (Ponse cited in Epstein 1987, p. 33). Ponse referred to this notion as a form of identity work: through this performance, individuals create a coherent interpretation of their identities. I argue that this effort to strive for consistency in the construction of a homosexual identity is intricately tied to Weber (2012)'s concept "biological homonormativity", in which both the ideology of biological determinism and homonormativity construct and reinforce the consistent gay/lesbian narrative. As a result, performing identity work would lead the subjects to not only believe in the truth of their sexuality but also to direct their behaviors in such a way that aligns their sexual desire with their respective gender and gender expression:

Vinh (23, gay): So far I'm not that feminine, so I don't need to change myself so much but I need to pay attention the way I walk and to each of my gestures. (Note: The subject then proceeded to show me his "before-and-after" ways of crossing legs and gesturing hands to show his progress to achieve masculinity.)

Quang (21, gay): Sometimes when I feel overly excited I tend to not being able to hold myself together and express my emotions freely, which gives away my femininity. But most of the time I manage to control myself and act in a masculine manner like other men.

In both instances above, my gay informants expressed the desire to be seen as masculine. They insisted that a gay man needed to be masculine, revealing one of the cultural standards that constructed the gay identity. Masculinity became a tool to draw boundaries between categories: when I asked Vinh about his take on the gay men who embraced their femininity and liked to dress in women's clothes, he was certain that these men were in fact transgender (male to female) who "mis-labeled" themselves due to their lack of knowledge about LGBTQ categories. Vinh's answer showed that gender expression (whether one appeared masculine or feminine) was an aspect that defined which category of queers one belonged to. Just as Foucault (1984) contends, when identity categories become the individual's rules of conduct, they will serve as limitations to freedom of expression. These rules of conduct are also highly effective as they are internalized and become the truth of the subject's reality, shaping meanings and preferences (Foucault, 1978; Giddens, 1992):

Me: why do you feel the need to "correct" your behaviors to be more masculine?

Vinh: like I told you I like pretty stuff and good stuff, and a masculine man will be better than a feminine man, so I just fix myself a little bit. It's really not a big deal. It helps my self-image to become a bit closer to perfection.

Me: So perfection means that a man being masculine and a woman being feminine?

Vinh: Exactly. Of course a girl can have tomboy style and short hair, but well I don't really like girls with short hair anyway [...] A man needs to be masculine and a woman needs to be feminine; therefore, I try to adjust my behaviors to be more compatible with my physical body. […] It's just like someone who learns English and tries to speak like an American, simply because it sounds better than having a Vietnamese accent. I am a guy so I have to look like a guy.

As the embodiment of the gay culture shaped by homonormativity, my informant Vinh provided the typical representation of gay men in the mainstream pro-gay media. Vinh was a middle-class, cisgender[8], gender normative gay man. His romantic relationship also resembled the homonormative representation of a masculine-feminine gay couple, in which Vinh acquired the role of the more feminine one in the relationship. Vinh used the two terms *top* and *bottom* to refer to the gender roles in a gay relationship, and insisted that whether one was top or bottom depended on their "natural instinct". He shared with me a past experience where he tried to act as a top in a relationship, in which he "failed" because he was not a "top thuần chủng" (translation: a thoroughbred top/ a pure top). Vinh's answers reveal the ultimate paradox of homonormativity, when some gay men are expected to be masculine and gender normative while at the same time submitting to the role of the female in their relationship. On the one hand, Vinh's effort in correcting his behaviors signifies a work in progress toward the alignment of sex, gender identity and gender expression, supporting the idea that gender, being a social construct, can be performed through constituting and reproducing actions that are deemed normative (Butler 1990, 1993; West & Zimmerman, 1987). On the other hand, his characterization of some gay men born to be "thoroughbred top" indicates that gender can only be naturally granted. Under this homonormative framework, Vinh's effort to work on his masculinity becomes a never-ending pursuit. He can be masculine, but never masculine enough. My gay friend Lê referred to this never-ending pursuit as "[as a gay guy], you can never be too masculine,

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[8] "Cisgender describes someone who feels comfortable with the gender identity and gender expression expectations assigned to them based on their physical sex." (Green & Peterson, 2004, p.2)

only too feminine". Evidently, homonormativity replicates and reinforces the heterosexual domination through both the emphasis on hegemonic masculinity and gender roles.

While masculinity is a standard that conceptualizes the Vietnamese gay identity, femininity does not assume a similar role in the construction of a lesbian identity. My lesbian informants divided the lesbian population into two basic groups: butch (or soft-butch)[9] and femme. Similar to the top/bottom model, butch and femme were used to indicate both sexual and mental roles in a lesbian relationship. However, it is worth noting that initially the two terms "butch" and "femme" are only categories to define gender expression and style, developed in the West. While "butch" refers to a girl with tomboy/masculine look, "femme" refers to a feminine girl. When these categories are treated as not only gender expression but also gender role, there arises an expected consistency in role and expression. My informants shared stories of lesbians signifying their role through gender expression:

> Mi (18, lesbian): Most soft butch in the lesbian community here has the tendency to make themselves strong and masculine, because of the expectation coming from the femme population. Femmes want to be protected, and this makes the soft butch believe that if they want to get a femme then they need to be strong and masculine. They will try to act like a guy through their clothes and gestures and sometimes engage in activities like getting a tattoo, smoking or drinking […] to attract femme.

In this case, the two terms (soft) butch/femme initially used to indicate gender expression were reinterpreted and enacted as mental/sexual roles in the lesbian relationship. As Mi noted, the tendency to "butch up" was not necessarily coming from individual preferences; instead, it was used as a tactic for attraction. Such tactic could only work only when this community adopted a binary model that shaped rules and limits for attraction. In this heterosexual spirit, opposite attraction was considered the norm in the quest of finding a potential partner: masculinity (butch) attracted femininity (femme) and vice versa, and

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

gender expression was translated into a binary relationship model in which one became the protector/giver and the other became the protected/receiver. Homonormativity was also at work through the replication of gender binary model as well as the emphasis on the alignment of "sexuality" (giver or receiver) and gender expression (masculine or feminine). Similarly, this alignment of sexuality and gender expression was present when my lesbian informants talked about the realization of their sexuality:

> Sen (21, lesbian): I knew about my sexuality since middle school. I knew because my personality was not very feminine. I did not like to wear girls' clothes. I preferred having short hair. […] When I came out to my brother recently, he said he was not surprised because from a young age I already showed it in my personality. Like, as a child I would prefer playing football instead of playing with dolls.

Sen identified as "butch" (both in terms of expression and role) and stressed that her orientation had already been "showed" from a young age. Her answer also revealed a consistent narrative, reinforcing the idea that sexuality was biological. However, sexuality was intricately liked to gender identity and gender expression: the "sign" of her homosexuality came first from her "not very feminine" personality and her preference to dress in a masculine style. Sen's emphasis on her sexuality being both biological and biologically linked to her gender identity and expression preference made it impossible for her to imagine dating another "butch" lesbian. Once again, identity work served as limitation to the pursuit of new possibilities. As Foucault (1988, p. 215-216) aptly put: "The subject is incited to produce a discourse of truth about his sexuality which is capable of having effects on the subject himself". Sen's discourse of truth about her sexuality helped to create a new social reality with new rules to follow. In this case, such new reality was no less heterosexist.

The queer relationships: a binary model

In *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu (2001) argued that queer relationships also reproduced heterosexual norms and gender roles, a claim that Skeggs (2004) critically contested to. My

interviews, in general, supported Bourdieu's notion that in most relationship a masculine dominant figure was reportedly present. This tendency appeared to be strongest among my homosexual informants. As evident in the last section, categories such as top/bottom and butch/femme were enacted as gender roles in their relationships, reflecting the yin/yang theory of opposing and complementary forces. My gay informant Vinh, for example, stressed that the "bottom" one who was not as "strong" could rely on the "top" in the relationship, while my gay informant Nam referred to his relationship as constituting a mature "top" who protected the childlike "bottom". Similarly, in the lesbian community, a widespread belief in the butch/femme relationship model instilled the notion that not all lesbians could be pursued:

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

Chi's answer showed that identifying as "butch" or "femme" had become a precondition to enter the lesbian dating market in Vietnam, as these terms were believed to speak for what the person could bring to the relationship. This led Chi to feel frustrated and alienated from the lesbian community as the question "what type of lesbian are you" was constantly brought up to her. Chi then discussed the tendency of some lesbians to "dramatize" their gender performance to attract potential partners. It is worth noting that through dramatizing gender roles in relationships, these individuals perpetuate the idea that masculinity and femininity are strict, rigid, innate categories that exclude one another, a notion underlying heteronormativity. Yet, this binary model continued to be adopted without confronting any challenge from most of my informants.

The binary model in queer relationships does not exist with problem. One of those is the limitation of available choices. Suddenly, it becomes unthinkable for two butches or two femmes to date one other. In my joint interview with two close friends Sen and Hoa (both

self-identified as "butch"), I asked whether they would consider dating girls who also have a masculine appearance. They both shook their heads:

> Hoa (21, lesbian): Probably not [laugh]. That would feel like two "dudes" getting together!
>
> Sen (21, lesbian): Nah, it would be a bit weird.

At the time of the interview, Hoa and Sen were both in a relationship with partners whom they described as "very feminine." Hoa described herself as someone with "a strong personality", and she wanted to be the protector and "the stronger one" in her relationship. Sen, her best friend, backed her up with the same logic – because they were strong and masculine, their girlfriend should be the "bánh bèo vô dụng" (translation: "useless cupcake") type of lesbian, not some "dudes". Here, the language they used clearly reflected the gender assigned to each "type of lesbian": while their feminine girlfriends were seen as "useless cupcakes" (in the Vietnamese discourse "useless cupcake" is similar to "damsel in distress"), the strong, masculine type of lesbian would be considered a "dude". It became apparent that these two informants relied on a binary model constructed from the image of a man and a woman to characterize their relationship. This instance revealed how Butler's (1990)'s matrix of sex/gender/desire was adopted and used as a framework to create culturally intelligible identities and relationships even in the queer community. Butler's heterosexual matrix constitutes compulsory heterosexuality as a main feature, which makes it seem paradoxical that compulsory heterosexuality is adopted by a homosexual population. However, if one considers how committed these informants were in finding coherence between their gender expression and the roles they adopted in their relationships, compulsory heterosexuality seemed to still manifest in same-sex relationships through the binary model of a masculine dominant (to use Bourdieu's term) and a feminine figure. This commitment to the heterosexual model, coupled with an essentialist view of identity, led this community to adopt a new social reality that seemed not any less rigid or entrapping:

> Chi (19, lesbian): The irony is that here we have a bunch of butch lesbians that are single, sexually frustrated and cannot do anything about it because "how can two

> dudes fall in love with each other? That's gross!" And I thought to myself, what the fuck you are all women!
>
> Vinh (23, gay man): There are gay men who switch from "bottom" to "top" as they grow older and become more mature. But the relationship which constitutes a bottom and bot-to-top is not ideal. That bot-to-top person will never be as a good as a thoroughbred top. They won't be able to control their relationship, they're not strong enough to be its cornerstone.

As the queer identity is interpreted through an essentialist narrative, the romantic relationship that follows this essentialist self-identification inadvertently becomes rigid and fixated into a model (in this case, it's a model that resembles the same "old heterosexual virility"). Identities conceptualized as essential lose the power to fluctuate and flexibly change: as evidenced, the butch lesbians in Chi's comment fixated their identity as "dude" and therefore, could not perceive themselves to date another "dude," while Vinh perceived the bot-to-top gay man as "not the real deal" and thus, could not sustain a long-term relationship. As Butler (1990) stressed, in the heterosexual matrix, gender and sexuality are intertwined in creating the culturally intelligible subjects. But when gender (and so does sexuality) conceals its performative nature, and is perceived to be a natural state of the self or "the law, the principle, the codes of their existence", then reality can become an unbending, rigid regime (Foucault, 1984, p. 166). In the case of these queer identities, the belief in (and conformance to) biological homonormativity inadvertently creates a new social reality with its own rigid path to performance, one that in turn justifies the notion that such an essentialist queer identity exists.

In this chapter, I discuss how biological determinism is deployed in queer politics to give the queer identity a legitimate, self-validating standing. It is also in this construction of the queer identity as biological that a new social reality is produced for the queer community, one that contains new rules and codes of conducts. My informants show that their belief in an essential truth of the queer identity leads them to conform to ideas of masculinity and

femininity and to even dramatize their gender expression in order to find a meaningful relationship. Through this conformity, compulsory heterosexuality is left unchallenged, if not also reinforced through a binary model adopted by many of my homosexual informants. The hegemony of biological determinism also instills a dangerous assumption much far beyond: by seeking legitimacy through an essentialist argument, queer politics reconstitutes the notion that only lives that are considered or proven to be natural would deserve respect, protection, and recognition. This in turn serves as limitations to the freedom of all sexual lives, especially those that fall outside the matrix of sex/gender/desire and appear culturally unintelligible. Here, I second Foucault's (1984, p. 166) argument, that classification can help people find their belonging, but it should not become the "code of their existence." When that happens, people may escape from a rigid culture just to find themselves in another reality that is no less entrapping.

6. Analytical Chapter 2: *Habitus and the Classed Distinction of Queerness*

> In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, any determination is negation; and tastes are no doubt first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ("sick-making") of the taste of others. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56)

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) emphasizes that the body is a site through which processes of judgment and appropriation constantly take place. The body communicates values of class and tastes, as well as becoming the physical reality (*physicality*) of morality ideals. Through bodily features and choices of styles, the body becomes the physicality that represents, reproduces, and reinforces the social constructions of class, aesthetic taste, and morality (Bourdieu, 1984; Skeggs, 2004). Such attribute also gives the body potentials to become political: Fraser (1999) notes that relying on making the queer bodies visible is central to the work of queer politics.

In Vietnam, the bodies of queer people, especially transgender men and women, are typical subjects to exploit for entertainment by media productions. Transgender characters (more so for trans-woman characters than trans-man) are increasingly personated in films and reality shows for comedic effects. This escalation in recent years has been referred to by many state newspapers as "trào lưu giả gái" [the drag queen trend] (Đinh, 2015; Minh, 2015; Thu, 2015). Yet, while Judith Butler (1990) embraces the performances of drag queens as exposing gender's performativity and therefore politically challenge the essentialist belief about gender, such performances in the Vietnamese media context do not show any sign of politically empowering the queer identities. On the contrary, the drag queen trend is employed as a mindless tactic to increase viewing, seemingly because the audiences are still "buying it":

> Using male actors dressed and acted like women is still an effective selling tactic. It doesn't matter whether these TV programs carry any meaningful message; as long as there is an effeminate, sissy male artist on stage, it is enough to attract the audiences and increase ratings… [According to the director D.T.], "TV audiences are currently into amusing, ridiculous shows. The more absurd and foolish the show

is, the more people will be watching and talking about it." (Thu, 2015, para.8-9, my
translation)

It is apparent that the representation of queer people in the Vietnamese media is
intrinsically associated with the idea of distaste. Such representation provokes laughter
simply because it is seen as ridiculous, absurd, and vulgar (but worthy of curiosity). These
representations overall create an image of queer people as excessive sexualized beings,
revolving around how they present themselves sexually and their obsession with sex. As
Beverly Skeggs (2004) demonstrates in her book *Class, Self, Culture*, bodily representation
is not just about creating distance but also an association with moral values. In her writing,
she argues that this connection together constructs the working-class as excessive, having
no self-control, and ultimately immoral. I believe Skeggs' observation is also relevant in
the case of the queer bodies, with the representation of queer characters in the Vietnamese
media as having the same working-class characteristics: as excessive, having no self-
control, and ultimately immoral.

In this chapter, however, my focus is not on how the queer bodies are portrayed in the
Vietnamese media, but rather – how they are materialized and conceptualized by the queer
youth in Vietnam themselves. From the first glance, one can quickly note how my
informants are displeased with the representation of queer characters in the Vietnamese
media and press. A study by ISEE and the Academy of Journalism and Communication
(2011) on the portrayal of homosexuality in the Vietnamese press confirmed the reasons, as
it demonstrated how prejudice and stereotypical language continued to shape the image of
homosexual and transgender people in the Vietnamese press. A closer look at the interview
data, however, exposes to me another trend in the self-representations embodied by my
informants, one that is also media-driven. Such representation is close to what Duggan
(2003) and Weber (2012) previously referred to as "homonormativity". Here in this
chapter, I argue that homonormativity has become a dimension of the queer habitus in
Vietnam. In other words, the field that regulates ideas of class, taste, and aesthetic in the

queer space of Vietnam, is constantly informed by norms of middle-class heterosexuality, cosmopolitanism, and consumerism.

A previous study in the context of the UK, by Alison Rooke (2007), showed a similar trend. In her ethnographic study of the gay and lesbian cultural space, Rooke acknowledged the existence of a *lesbian habitus*, one that navigated the performance of a lesbian identity through the politics of inclusion and exclusion. To sufficiently possess the right kinds of capital, Rooke wrote, helped one to participate in the queer space (or to use Bourdieu's term, *the field*), and to express their sexual desire to potential interests, whereas those who lacked such dispositions would feel marginalized, invisible, or ignored. In Rooke's research, this habitus was constructed through particular forms of embodied and linguistic capital that emphasized the aesthetization of the lesbian and gay bodies. Inadvertently, class became central in the construction of the lesbian habitus: Rooke wrote about the uneventful field trip to a lesbian bar with her working-class informants, whose presence was invisible in a space that promised recognition and inclusion. Because the body is "the site where class tastes materialize," (Rooke, 2007, p. 239) certain bodies will be favored over others due to the inscription of taste. Rooke's working-class informants reported feeling intimidated and lacking the necessary cultural resources to be "readable" as lesbians or to participate in the queer space, one that seemed to be reserved only for those with the right taste, the right body, and the right learned behaviors. This example showed a further division in an already marginalized community where the sense of belonging became an achieved status, and where identity markers such as social class continued to establish boundaries and assign symbolic power to some while rendering invisibility to others.

The question, then, becomes – what constitutes "the right body" that is central to the lesbian habitus in Rooke's study? Which classed subjectivities are coded as legitimate and tasteful, and possessing the right capital to engage in the field? Many studies demonstrate that it is the dispositions of the middle class that are seen as right, authentic, and legitimate, while working-class identities are presented as vulgar or ostentatious (Fraser, 1999; Lawler, 1999, 2004; Skeggs, 2004). This is intertwined with the notion that aesthetic taste is

intrinsic to certain (classed) identities rather than something that can be developed over time, which reinforces and legitimizes class distinctions, and inadvertently, class inequalities (Fraser, 1999; Lawler, 1999). When class meets with the dynamics of sexuality and gender, there arises the cultural image of a queer/classed aesthetic identity – with an ideal-shaped body, an impeccable taste, and cultivated consumption practices that sets one apart from others (Rooke, 2007). The queer body is materialized into a site of cultural knowledge and competence, which gives a classed dimension into the construction of the queer habitus, while the emphasis on aesthetic taste, as an inherent disposition of the self, underpins an essentialist view to this queer identity.

Drawing on Rooke's insightful study of the lesbian habitus, I develop the central questions for this chapter: What constitutes the queer habitus in the context of Vietnam? What are the bodily inscriptions for being seen as "appropriately queer" adopted by the Vietnamese LGBTQ youth community? What makes a body become "readable" in the queer space? If homonormativity indeed informs the set of norms regulated in the queer space, would it also create a hierarchy of taste that ranks certain queer bodies over others? Using Bourdieu's theory of class and distinction, and Skegg's arguments on class representation, I will address the above questions and discuss the class distinctions inherent in the queer youth community of Vietnam.

6.1 The Classed Queer Body

Nam (26, gay): In our community there is the standard – "if you are gay you must be pretty." Kinda sad to think about it. A lot of people say they don't mind the appearance, [laugh] don't trust them: they are lying through their teeth! When you go outside you always have to take care of your appearance, or else people will judge you. I know some guys who will not dare to come out of the house if they look a bit "tàn" (literal translation: withered/faded).

I came to interview Nam, a well-known blogger in the Vietnamese gay community, thanks to the help of my friend Lê. In the coffee shop of that afternoon, there were Nam, Lê, and me. Lê's presence at this interview was simply as an ice-breaker; he did not speak much,

although at this particular remark, he turned to me with this meaningful "I told you so" look. Being friends with Lê for over ten years, I was aware of his constant need to stay young and attractive. Lê went to the gym five days a week, using different types of facial creams, maintaining a healthy diet, and keeping himself informed with different fashion and hairstyle trends. Many times, Lê explained to me that these habits were necessary to help him blend in with the gay community of Saigon. Similarly, there were times when Lê felt unconfident with his appearance and refused to go out. So, when Nam shared with me how important it was for a gay guy to stay pretty, I couldn't help but noticing the satisfying look on Lê's face, confirming that it was, indeed, the reality in Vietnam. Later in the interview, Lê and Nam exchanged some information about which gym they went to and the costs to maintain membership at these gyms.

The question then becomes, what makes up that beauty? As Eagleton (1990) argues, aesthetic virtues are closely connected to the power structures of a society. Class is central to the construction of aesthetics taste, which gives some social bodies an exchange value, while rendering others worthless or invisible (Rooke, 2007; Skeggs, 2004;). The social construction of beauty, therefore, cannot be analyzed without an observation on class. In the case of my friend's Lê, beauty is achieved through both the ability to afford certain beauty-maintenance services (gym membership, cosmetics products, branded clothing) and the knowledge to distinguish between what the market wants and what it does not. His emphasis on maintaining "the right body" with "the right fashion" echoes both Bourdieu's (1984) and Skeggs' (1997, p. 84) observation on how the body communicates the status of class:

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

Here, the body is treated as a site through which traces of a person's history are collected over time. The body, as well as the way it is dressed, gives evidences of different cultural

markers that a person identifies with. As Fraser (1999) notes, it is a way in which class (as well as gender, race, sexuality) differences are materialized. Both Nam and Lê's practices to care for their appearance emphasize how appearance is intertwined with status in their field. It also shows how class has been incorporated into the gay habitus of Saigon, in which a gay man as Lê or Nam would need to have access to both economic and cultural capital to maintain the right body (and accordingly earn legitimation from his fellows friends and attract potential partners). Yet, such operation happens too subtly that class is disguised simply as styles and tastes, reinforcing the notion that some just happen to possess a better, more accurate taste than others which allows them to participate in the queer field. Rooke's (2007) study, for example, demonstrated how class was used to conceal the performative, temporary nature of the lesbian habitus, while disguising itself as an innate essence. Her observation at a lesbian bar noted that some of the guests "embod[ied] a lesbian aesthetic without seemingly having to even try" while her working-class informants had to actively change their appearance to become "readable [...] or coded with any value in this field of practice" (Rooke, 2007, pp. 243-246). As the standards for beauty, attraction, and desire are narrowly defined by the practices and maintenance of class differences, certain identities will hold classed advantages when participating in the queer field, while the others are considered wrong, unattractive, or undesirable. Vinh, another gay man in my study, relied on this very notion to justify how he distanced himself from other gay people, whose appearances disgusted him:

> Vinh (23, gay): I know a lot of gay people but I'm not close to them […] I feel that they create a very bad image about this community. Like in the way they dress, it's a bit too flashy, too colorful, and they overuse the accessories. It just looks anti-fashion […] They can wear expensive clothes but still look very cheap.

In *Class, Self, Culture*, Beverly Skeggs (2004) specifies some of the ways in which the working class is represented in the media. These representations include stereotypes as the following: waste, excess, dangerous, lacking taste, unmodern, and lack of shame. Skeggs argues that the power to represent and encode the working class as lacking value reinforces

the notion that *cultural capital is the middle class.* This notion seconds Bourdieu's quote (1984, p. 56) at the beginning of this chapter, "taste is no doubt first and foremost distaste". By depicting other gay people in Vietnam as dressing "excessive" and therefore "cheap", my informant Vinh helped reinforce a set of standards that legitimize and perpetuate the taste (as well as the standing) of his middle-class background. His statement also shows that taste is not simply about having the financial means to afford expensive outfits but rather about having the cultural knowledge to know which bodies and which presentations are culturally desirable.

It is worth noting that class matters in different ways for different queer categories. If for a gay man it is important to maintain a fit body and good facial skin, for transgender people, what matters most is whether their bodies are *gendered* enough to be culturally intelligible. Here, I should note that none of the transgender informants that I interviewed had gone through a complete sex-reassignment surgery. Instead, they resorted to altering only a certain part of their bodies or simply using accessories and clothes to express their gender identity. Hiếu, a trans-man in my study, emphasized that he did not feel the need to go through a complete transformation as long as he could "pass" the gender test. At the time of the interview, Hiếu had been injecting hormones to himself and experienced certain changes on his body, which was enough for him to be recognized as a man in public. Hà, my trans-woman informant, flexibly expressed her gender through dresses, push-up bras, make-ups and wigs in social contexts that made her feel safe. Such flexibility, however, was exactly what caused issues for many of my gay informants when they discussed the bodies of transgender people in relation to their standards of beauty:

> Nam (26, gay): I'm okay with trans-women who could make themselves look completely like a girl when they go out. But if they do it halfway, like using makeup while wearing men's clothing, or wearing a dress while they still have a male body, it would be very weird.

> Me: what if they don't have the means to change their appearance all the way?

> Nam: *then just stay home, why do they have to go out?* Everybody would look at them if they go out, and that is weird [...] "one scabby sheep is enough to spoil the whole flock". Even I, as a member of this [LGBT] community, feel annoyed by that kind of images, then how can we expect acceptance from the public? I don't know how they could do that. Like, when they look into the mirror, *can't they tell that it just looks very wrong*? (my emphasis in italics)

Lisa Walker (1993), in an article about the lesbian community, notes that visibility is increasingly used as a tactic of identity politics in the context of queer rights. By celebrating and demonstrating the diversity of identities through visual differences, these minority groups claim their right for recognition and social justice. Fraser (1999, p. 114) seconds this notion, emphasizing that "visibility is a source of power". In this case, power lies in the fact that such bodies and presentations, through their existence, challenge the existing norms of its culture and its definition of normality. The Viet Pride event in 2014 was an evidence of this tactic, where the participants were asked to wear pink shirts to celebrate diversity and challenge norms of masculinity. Following this logic, the visibility of transgender bodies provides the perfect tactic to challenge what Judith Butler (1990, p. 151) refers to as the *heterosexual matrix* which demands the coherence found in "a stable sex expressed through a stable gender […] through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality". Transgender people's appearance reflects both the instability of sex and gender and the transforming diversity of bodies and identities, giving them the means to contest to the hegemony of gender roles and by extension, compulsory heterosexuality.

In my study, however, transgender is noted as the least appreciated group in the Vietnamese queer community. Nam's statement, for example, asserts that the appearance of transgender people in public can "spoil" the whole movement because it offends people. This statement also confirms class and gender authority upon the bodies with the implication that certain bodies should not be entitled to be visible when violating the codes of conduct of its society. Nam's desire for public acceptance that led him to characterize the transgender bodies as "wrong" and worthy of contempt was one of those instances that made me

wonder what the LGBT right movement in Vietnam was really about and whether it was anywhere near liberation for this community. Nam's statement implies that the normative heterosexual, cisgender identity is still used as a base against which a queer identity is measured and judged whether it *deserves* of acceptance. Bourdieu (1990b, p. 155) aptly sums up this political contradiction in the following quote: "Resistance may be alienating and submission may be liberating. Such is the paradox of the dominated and there is no way out of it."

Nam, and so did some of my other gay informants, eventually stood out as "ultimate gender conformists" (Zimman & Hall, 2009, p.170). This "ultimate" conformity to gender roles not only manifested in their self-emphasis on performing masculinity (which I discussed in the previous chapter), but also in how they characterized transgender people (especially trans-women) and their bodies as "half way", "wrong", "unnatural". The only context in which transgender bodies were perceived acceptable (and even beautiful) by these informants was when a complete sex-reassignment transformation had been achieved ("look *completely* like a girl"). In this case, the gendered body would be made complete through classed intervention, requiring the person to have financial means and cultural knowledge to achieve the right gendered body. The desirable body in this field, undoubtedly, is a middle class, cisgender body.

6.2 The Classed Queer Mind

In the last section, I discuss the standards for beauty and for bodies deemed as "readable" and acceptable in the Vietnamese queer field. It is worth noting that, as Skeggs (2004) argues, the body is also connected to moral evaluation. Previously, I gave the example of how Vinh, one of my gay informants, described some other gay people as being excess and cheap. Here, the notion of morality could also be justified as a tool for distinction and distancing of the middle class from the working class. My gay informants once again separated themselves from the transgender category, not through an ideal body image, but rather a classed mind:

Lê (23, gay): Being gay you have to do two jobs at one: being masculine and being sophisticated. You definitely would have to know stuff. Like you would need to have a taste in fashion, wine, cuisine [...] There's this saying: "Act like a straight man, dress like a gay man.

In all of my interviews with the gay informants, I encountered the exact stereotype that Lê provided ("Act like a straight man, dress like a gay man"). As a group, these interviewees altogether spoke of an image of the Vietnamese cultural success: as well-dressed, highly educated men with polite mannerism. They also shared traits of cosmopolitan identities by speaking fluent English, (some) having been educated in the West, and working for international companies. They were, as I previously noted, the embodiment of a homonormative gay culture, in which they achieved legitimation not through challenging but through supporting the values of heteronormativity: being cis-gender, middle class, and monosexual (Duggan, 2003).

Explaining the sophistication standards that Lê gave, my other gay informants also expressed pride in their sexual identity, believing that it gave them a deeper perspective on life. Minh, another gay man, referred to this ability as "taking a step back to observe" instead of taking common sense for granted. Since it took him a period of time to do (English) research on LGBT identities and accept himself, Minh learned to become more observant and analytical when approaching an issue as well as to develop his own point of view. Comparing himself to heterosexual guys, Minh believed that gay men were more likely to be critical thinkers due to their social circumstances. He also asserted that gay men could be more in tune with their "feminine side", which helped them dress in a more fashionable manner:

Minh (23, gay): There are more gay men and lesbians in companies that work on advertising and marketing because those are creative environment, and gay people are usually more creative, open, sophisticated and fashionable than straight people so they will end up in there.

Quang (21, gay): I think being gay is fortunate for me. I look at the straight guys around me and find them very tedious and boring.

In Rooke's (2007) study of the lesbian habitus, she discussed the binary characterization of the queer cultural space versus the other spaces. As the queer space was advertised as a "promise of visibility, eroticism, cosmopolitanism, and consumption", the others were depicted as rigid, non-cosmopolitan, unfashionable, and heteronormative (Rooke, 2007, p. 241). This binary characterization seemed to align with Minh's observation of gay people versus straight people. What is worth noting from Rooke (2007)'s observation and discussion is that certain queer bodies can be commodified to be incorporated into these queer cosmopolitan space, rendering the other queer identities invisible and marginalized. In my study, I found that my gay informants were actively seeking practices to achieve aesthetics and class to gain participation into the queer field, while at the same time being the voice that marginalized transgender people and barred them from participation in the field. Middle-class values were embraced by many of my gay informants through their depiction of transgender people as vulgar, low class, and unnatural:

Minh (23, gay): I had some aversion toward transgender people, but now I try to understand them. In the past, when I looked at them I often saw society laughing at them or insulting them, so I thought if I were associated with them I would also be insulted. Also, I thought that guys who dressed in girls' clothes looked very unnatural. Transgender people usually use vulgar language, and because of that I don't feel comfortable to hang out with that group. I don't have any transgender friend and I also don't have the desire to befriend one yet.

When I asked Minh to quote some of the language that he considered "inappropriate", he said that it was "too vulgar" for him to say out loud. This showed how he kept a considerable distance from what he perceived to be a culture shared by the trans-women in Vietnam. This culture resembled how Vinh previously depicted: a lower cultural class manifested in the "cheap" style of dressing and the use of offensive language. Beverly Skeggs (2004) makes the same connection in her book, stating that the working class is

represented as excess embodiment together with a reduced sense of morality and vulgarity. But Skeggs also emphasizes that such representations of the working class should be seen as the mechanism for the middle class to create and attribute values for themselves, "through distance, denigration and disgust, as well as appropriation and affect of attribution" (Skeggs, 2004, p. 118). By keeping their distance from this "low class" atmosphere, Vinh and Minh could both attribute middle-class values to their own, turning themselves into tasteful, moral and *natural* subjects.

6.3 Classing Queer [10]

> Vinh (23, gay): I think my feelings matter more than what people say. You cannot forbid the neighbor's dog from barking; it barks when it wants to, and there's nothing you can do about that. In a way I actually look down on those people. I feel sorry for them; they are so behind the times, so slow, so uncivilized, so lacking the light of enlightenment, you know […] Who can say that they have a better life than mine? Maybe their life is very boring, with much less of the romance, beauty, and sophistication that I have in my life. I can't pity them enough so why should I even care about what they think?

Prior to this comment, my informant Vinh shared with me about his public display of affection with his boyfriend. Vinh acknowledged that the Vietnamese public in general still considered same-sex affections to be offensive and inappropriate, but that was none of his concern. Vinh proceeded to construct a dichotomy between him and the public, an "Us versus Them" model, in which "them" was presented as having an uncivilized, outdated mode of thinking and generally inferior. For Vinh, his queerness occupied a legitimate space in the world of modernity and civilization, to the extent that those who failed to acknowledge this legitimacy were simply making fools of themselves and deserved his "pity". In this type of statement, respect for queerness arose as a product of modernity, of intellectual advancement, as a *cultured* property. Against this discourse Vinh positioned the Vietnamese public – as archaic, benighted, and lacking awareness.

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[10] This section's title is named after Fraser (1999)'s article titled "Classing Queer: Politics in Competition".

Vinh's statement exposes how acceptance and support for queerness is becomingly featured as an indication of a developed, civilized society. For urban space, this means that celebrating gay culture is central to constructing an attractive, competitive image of cultural inclusion and cosmopolitanism (Bell & Binnie, 2004). Despite its promise of inclusion, the politics of exclusion remains a feature of these spaces. Studying the Manchester Gay Village, Binnie and Skeggs (2004) showed how the straight female visitors relied on their cultural knowledge to legitimize their presence in the gay village. These same people contended that those without these types of knowledge should not be welcomed within the space for fear that the gay authenticity of the village would be destroyed. This study effectively demonstrates how middle-class dispositions, coupled with notions of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, all intertwine into constructing the contemporary gay identity and sexualized space. Through Binnie and Skeggs' observation of the Manchester Gay Village, it is not difficult to see that the gay/queer identity has become a selling point triggering consumption for both queers and non-queer populations (see also Peters, 2011; Valocchi, 1999). Inscribed with upper-middle class dispositions, the mainstream, marketable gay image is painted with, to use Vinh's words, "romance, beauty, and sophistication" – cultural qualities that become attached to the gay identity:

> Minh (23, gay): Gay men adore beauty and perfection which leads us to pursue a fit, healthy body and beautiful clothes, whether you go with the professional, elegant style or something glamorous and fashionable. Straight people are just plain; they're like "whatever". For example if you go to a coffee shop that has beautiful decorations, and even the bathroom is decorated in a way that makes sense and you feel pleased with it, you will later find that the person who owns that place is gay.

Valocchi (1999), in an article addressing the inscription of class into the gay identity, noted that the collective gay identity emerged as middle-upper classed through a historical process. The roles of the neo-liberal market as well as the state were central to this process. The same gay identity united across class, race, and gender performance, initially created for political purpose, was gradually recognized by the neo-liberal market to be full of

potential for attracting a new class of consumers and, effectively, profits. Eventually, the meaning of the gay identity was shifted "from a political category […] to a consumer category" (Valocchi, 1999, p.220). Peters (2011, p. 194) noted that the commodification prospect of this same identity was extended to the mainstream media, with television networks aiming at queer viewers and the "pink dollar". This ranges from television series with queer characters such as *Glee, Modern Family, Scandal*, to those that focus explicitly on a queer community such as *Queer as Folk*. Studying reactions of gay, lesbian, and queer viewers to the series, Peters (2011) found that *Queer as Folk* became highly popular in the queer community as these viewers actively looked for the representations of queers onscreen as guidance for their own construction of self-image and identities. Peters (2011, p.206) then concluded that "the 'pink dollar' niche market and the public fight for equal rights and benefits fit well within neoliberal economic frameworks that seek to offload government expenses onto private citizens." But as "queer" was constructed in these shows within the framework of neoliberal consumerism, this effectively led to the increasing marginalization of other queer groups that were not White, middle-class, or gender normative (Peters, 2011). These further marginalized queer groups seemed to vanish from the market-image of "queer", an image that adapted well into Butler's matrix of sex/gender/desire and allowed itself into becoming culturally knowable and intelligible.

This discussion on the construction of the "queer" in Western mainstream media is particularly relevant to the case of contemporary Vietnamese queer youth, who were born after the Đổi Mới Reform in 1986. Their growing up was characterized with an open atmosphere, both economically and culturally, which allowed media channels from foreign countries to enter the national television networks. At the same time, the use of internet began to be popularized across the country. Nguyễn (2015) contended that this changing in the social and cultural atmosphere led to a disruption between the former values embraced in the Vietnamese youth culture, which stressed obedience and collectivism, to new values related to individualism and consumerism. Analyzing the content in the Vietnamese popular youth magazine *Hoa Học Trò*, Nguyễn showed how the magazine's content was gradually shifted over the decade after Đổi Mới with the increasing usage of Western

discourses and an emphasis on the consumption culture. This effectively led to the emergence of a Vietnamese "teen" population[11], "a distinct social group that had its own language, fashion, value systems, and role models" (Nguyễn, 2015, p. 17). The dramatic shift in the youth popular culture of Vietnam in the last three decades explains how the Vietnamese queer youth of today is very responsive to Western discourses and knowledge regarding non-normative gender/sexual identities. My informants' self-identification with the acronym LGBTQ, instead of using Vietnamese discourse, is already an evidence for this responsiveness. With English being a mandatory subject at school, these young people can utilize their language skill to look up information about issues they find relevant to their gender and sexuality, a type of knowledge that is not readily available in Vietnamese:

> Minh (23, gay): I look up information on STD [sexually transmitted disease] on the CDC[12] page of the US. I enjoy reading the health pages developed by the US and the UK; they have very specific, customized information for each community. [Knowing English] is definitely helpful. The majority of the health pages for gay men in Vietnamese are very biased; they translate information but they also put their own personal assumption [about gay people] in their articles. So these articles sound very negative, whereas American or English articles are very neutral, informative, and solution-oriented.

The responsiveness to knowledge developed in the West about queers and also the trust in these types of knowledge as "neutral" and less stigmatizing can explain how queer youth in Vietnam turn to foreign mainstream media, rather than the Vietnamese media, for queer representations. As a group my informants were generally skeptical of Vietnamese movies featuring queers: my bisexual informant Huy critiqued *Lạc Giới* (2014) for its characterization of bisexuality as being in relationships with both a man and a woman at the same time, while my lesbian informant Chi was furious after watching *Để Hội Tính* (2014) because it stigmatized transgender-women as being obsessed with sex. Their understanding

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[11] The term "teen" is used in contemporary Vietnamese to refer to young people. As Nguyễn (2015) explains in the beginning of her article, the root word "teen" has a long history in the Western discourse.
[12] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (cdc.gov)

of queerness and the queer image they identify with were then adopted through Western mainstream media:

> Lê (23, gay): I remember watching *I love you Phillip Morris* and [the characters] mentioned that there are things that go along well – gayness and luxury lifestyle.

It is in these representations that my informants find a connection, an understanding, and even explanations for their non-normative sexuality or gender. Yet, it is also in these same representations that a dimension of class is written into their construction of the queer body and the queer identity, coupled with an embrace for consumerism. As Peters (2011) emphasized, the Western mainstream queer representation is a product of the hegemonic power structure. This creation creates a dichotomy between queers versus straights, and even between "acceptable" queers (as valuable, tasteful citizens who contribute to society) versus the queerer queers who are deemed as "spoiling" the queer community image. Underlying this in-group marginalization is the notion of taste, as Bourdieu (1984) maintains in *Distinction*, which creates the tasteful versus tasteless subjects, and transforming them into the rightful versus wrongful identities. The Vietnamese queer habitus, therefore, is not only (cis)gendered, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, but also (middle-)classed, which controls the body and the dispositions that make up the "rightful" queer identity while encompassing and perpetuating external social structures of a classed, gendered Vietnamese society. This queer habitus is an example of how class cannot and should not be understood in separation from gender and sexuality: through the queer body, class, gender, and sexuality are revealed to be all intertwine into creating a culturally intelligible queer-normative identity. Inside this habitus, middle-class gay and lesbian identities become "the new normal".

7. Analytical Chapter 3: *"The Queerest of the Queer"*[13]

> But the worst part about this trend is that because the discrimination is perpetrated at least in part by our own community, it is given a sense of legitimacy. After all, it can't be homophobic if it's queers versus queers, right? (Walmsley, 2015, para. 21)

On June 26, 2015, the United States Supreme Court made a game-changing move for American gay rights activism by ruling the prohibition of gay marriage on the state level as unconstitutional, a decision which effectively led to the legalization of same-sex marriage across the United States. Outside of the Supreme Court, the historic decision was celebrated with cheering crowds holding rainbow flags and shedding tears of joy. Yes, it was a winning moment for gay rights in the US. But was it a win for the whole queer community?

Writing about "The Queers Left Behind", Colin Walmsley (2015) addressed this question by expressing his concern over a growing divergence of interests within the LGBT community. On the one hand, the writer described, we have the "mainstream" middle and upper-class queer culture, mostly made of white, cis-gender gay men whose campaign for marriage equality has led to the Supreme Court's ruling in 2015. On the other hand, we have queer homeless youth, queer people of color, and transgender people who have been increasingly marginalized by the interests of this "mainstream" queer culture which either ignores or silences their need for basic protection and recognition. After the winning moment of same-sex marriage, it seems that people are forgetting about the existence of other queer groups who are not white, cis-gender, middle or upper class. Sadly, in many cases the discrimination against this *othering* queer group actually comes from their more privileged queer fellows. As Walmsley (2015, para. 20) quoted from a young black transgender: "The damage comes from our own community."

The issue that Walmsley (2015) addressed in this article is evidently another example of how intersectionality critically defines and divides the interests of different oppressed groups. The same thing happens to feminism's fight for gender equality, in which race, class, and sexuality continue to interlock within the institution of gender oppression. When

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[13] Phrase borrowed from April Callis (2009, p. 220)

the challenges of intersectionality are not addressed and resolved, the alienation of certain minority population from the cause becomes inevitable. For the LGBTQ community, Walmsley argued, it is the poor queer, queer of color, and transgender people who get alienated from the mainstream campaign. "The queers left behind" that Walmsley brought to our attention are evidently left behind for reasons that are not directly caused by, yet still intricately linked to their sexuality or gender. It is their class, their race, their body that causes them to become invisible, unrelatable, and forgettable.

There is, yet, another queer group that Walmsley himself seemed to forget about, making them the left behind from the already left behind. It is bisexual people, whose sexual identity appears in the LG**B**T acronym yet somehow rarely visible in the mainstream queer activism. Even in queer theoretical works, bisexuality has been a silent subject, despite the many similarities between queer theory and bisexuality scholarship (Angelides, 2001; Callis, 2009; Goldman, 1996; Young, 2004). The lack of bisexual representation in Queer Theory is strongly criticized by April Callis (2009), who later proved that an inclusion of analysis on bisexuality would have strengthened the argument of both Foucault and Butler, two of the most influential thinkers of Queer Theory. Her argument shows that an inclusion of bisexuality (and by extension, other "left behind" queers) into advancing the cause for gender and sexuality equality is not at all unimaginable, if not blossoming with potentials. In reality, however, queers such as bisexuals continue to be marginalized and discriminated against by middle and upper-class gay men and lesbians, an alarming trend which consequently legitimizes the public stigmatization against them. (Kristal, 2016)

Writing this chapter, I hope to bring into this thesis the narratives of these "queerest of the queer", from those who are left behind or seen as traitors, to those whose identities and relationships have surpassed the cultural walls of heterosexual hegemony and gender performativity. These are the queer identities subjected to frequent contestations, skepticism, prejudice, and discrimination from the very queer community that demands justice for sexual and gender diversity. Yet, it is also in these queer identities that the potentials for deconstructing the gender binaries and breaking down the heterosexual

matrix are realized. In the second half of this chapter, I will then address the existence of a hierarchy within the Vietnamese queer youth community and the different axes of oppression that sustain and conserve this hierarchy. I argue that this hierarchy is constructed upon practices of homonormativity, which consequently perpetuates gender roles and maintains the essentialist conceptualization of the queer identity.

7.1 Locating bisexuality

> Huy (19, male/bisexual): Often I tell people that I am gay, but the truth is I am bisexual. Why? Because if I tell them that I am bisexual then I will be discriminated against, whereas if I say I am gay then gay people will be very open to me. Gay men especially hate bisexuals [...] I decide whether to come out as gay or bisexual depending on the context. I'm more attracted to guys then girls anyway.

Pajor (2005, p.574), in an essay articulating her personal experience and feelings of rejection of being a bisexual, wrote: "Transgendered people are the second-class citizens, and bisexuals are below even them. We're the white trash of the gay world, a group whom it's socially acceptable to not accept". Pajor wrote about how she continued to be seen and accepted only as a lesbian, and how her identification with bisexuality was always met with suspicion. Reliving through her personal struggles, Pajor expressed the feeling of not belonging in neither the straight nor the gay community, explaining a sense of isolation written upon the bisexual identity.

Pajor's experience with bisexual alienation was not simply a personal story. Many studies that touched on the bisexual identity revealed an uncomforting reality in which bisexual people continued to be stigmatized and discriminated against by gay men and lesbian. Masequesmay (2003)'s study on a support group for Vietnamese queer women showed that central in the construction of the group is "compulsory monosexuality", a term coined by James (1996) referring to the belief that people can only be attracted to one sex. In Masequesmay's observation, compulsory monosexuality effectively led to the marginalization of the bisexual members of the group. Characterized by the lesbians in the group as "confused", the bisexual members felt the pressure to act "as lesbian as [they]

could" and suppressed their interest toward men to not be seen as betraying their "lesbian sisters" (Masequesmay, 2003, pp. 207-208). Similar to the story told by Masequesmay, my bisexual informant Huy's experiences with gay men were constantly met with degrading remarks or suspicion once his interest for women was expressed. Eventually, Huy resorted to the same coping mechanism deployed by the bisexual women in Masequesmay's (2003) study: by taking the bisexual element out of his identity and representing himself as gay, Huy could feel accepted and welcomed by the surrounding queer community, which would have attacked him otherwise.

But why is the bisexual identity so despised, so detested and contested by the queer community? What leads to them being constructed as "a group whom it's socially acceptable to not accept" (Pajor, 2005, p. 574)? For one, as Masequesmay (2003) demonstrates, "compulsory monosexuality" leads to the belief that bisexuals are ultimately "confused" gay or lesbian who just can't seem to accept the "truth" of their sexuality. In this discourse, bisexual people are characterized as victims of heterosexual hegemony, who cannot get passed social pressure to finally "liberate" their homosexuality. While this discourse instills a passive dimension into the bisexual identity, my interview with a gay informant reveals a rather opposite notion, when identification with bisexuality is understood not as confusion but an active strategy to be accepted:

> Quang (21, gay): I don't really support the term "bisexual" because some people use it as a shield, because they don't have the gut to say that they are gay or lesbian. They call themselves bisexual because it sounds easier to the ears than homosexual. When they say they like both girls and guys, it is more socially acceptable than to say they only like people of the same gender.

In this type of thinking, bisexuals were seen as disguised homosexuals not having the courage to come out completely and therefore, trying to keep one foot inside the heterosexual world to minimize any social damage. This narrative turned the bisexual identity into an active, despicable "culprit" (instead of victim) who betrayed (instead of failing to accept) the "truth" of their sexuality and, by extension, the whole homosexual

community for their lack of courage. The irony was revealing: while Quang claimed that "bisexuality" was an identification used to gain social acceptance, it was this very identification that my informants had to avoid in order to be accepted in the queer community. Huy shared with me the experience of being degraded because of his identification with bisexuality, which later led him to adopt the term "gay" to protect himself:

> Huy (19, male/bisexual): I was chatting with this gay guy, I told him that I am bisexual. He then started sending me messages saying that I am such a slut, like why do I have to like both guys and girls, why can't I just stick to liking guys […] I also have friends who said that they know I am a good guy, but they hate me because I am bisexual […] Sometimes I'm really scared of gay people (laugh), that's why later I just told them that I'm gay so they will stop insulting me. This sounds ironic but it is the truth.

Similar to the notion which characterizes bisexuals as "confused" people, the belief that bisexuality is a term used to "shield" some homosexual cowards is constructed upon compulsory monosexuality, the idea that people can only be attracted to one sex. This reinforces the notion that bisexuals are not real, a belief confirmed by my bisexual informants to be widely shared across the Vietnamese queer youth community. As Callis (2009) notes, bisexuality is an identity that cannot be performed in monogamous cultures. Being in a relationship at a given time either labels a person as "homosexual" or "heterosexual", thus rendering bisexuals invisible (Callis, 2009; Eliason, 2000). Because gender (and by extension, sexuality) needs to be performed to be culturally intelligible or to be seen as "real", bisexuals then cannot be considered real without the existence of a bisexual act (Butler, 1990; Callis, 2009; Whitney, 2002). This consequently perpetuates and intensifies the denial of bisexual existence, or in other words, *bisexual erasure*. Sometimes bisexual erasure occurs even within the bisexual population itself when bisexuals feel the need to avoid self-identifying with the term "bisexual", as in the case of Huy, or the pressure to take a side:

Kim (24, female/bisexual): When you label yourself as bisexual, you have to explain to people and convince people that you have feelings for both genders. It's exhausting having to keep explaining like that. Therefore, to make life easier, many bisexuals just take a side, either homosexuality or heterosexuality based on their own preferences. I know many people who said they are heterosexual, even when they used to be romantically involved in a homosexual relationship. When I asked them, they just said that it was just a fling and it doesn't matter anymore.

The decision to "take a side" can be seen as a ticket of access into either the heterosexual or the homosexual dating market, a strategy historically deployed by bisexuals to avoid social prejudice (Mclean, 2008; Paul, 1984). Trying to make life easier, these bisexuals have to deny a part of their sexuality to fit into the new straight-or-gay reality. Inadvertently, this decision helps to perpetuate the oppression against bisexuality by validating the belief that bisexuality does not truly exist, and that their prior interest in both sexes is simply "a fling". Interestingly, the notion of the "fling" was also used by my gay friend Lê when he talked about his past relationship with a female friend in high school. Lê stressed that it was just a sort of experiment that took place while he was still confused about his sexuality. Referring to this "fling" experience, Lê – present at my interview with Huy – later expressed skepticism toward the way Huy identifying himself as bisexual. While riding me home on his motorbike, Lê discussed how Huy (now dating a guy) relied on his past involvement with a girl to label himself bisexual. Lê argued that it was simply a "fling," and that he believed Huy in fact was a gay man. This instance reinstates to me how bisexual erasure functions and spreads – through doubts, through denials of bi-identified people's experiences, and through the fact that bisexuality cannot be performed continuously and coherently, making it difficult to become culturally intelligible (Butler, 1990; Callis, 2009). But when it is seen as a possible identity, bisexuality then carries negative connotations, because the only performance that allows bisexuality to be read "would seem to directly play into common stereotypes of bisexuality" (Whitney, 2002, p. 118):

Nam (26, gay man): I think it's because they [bisexuals] are greedy. So in general we [gay people] don't hang out with them. Most people say it's better if you are gay or lesbian, much better than being in between you know. If I date a bisexual guy, one day I have to fight with a cupcake [a girl] over him, that would be so weird, so insulting, so wrong, you know, so if he likes cupcakes just stick to cupcakes.

Studying the "coming-out" experiences of bisexual people, Mclean (2008) stressed that the definition of bisexuality as having attraction to both men and women consequently led this group to be characterized as needing to be in relationships with both sexes simultaneously to satisfy their sex drive. Bisexuals therefore were subjected to negative stereotypes as being promiscuous, greedy, perverted, non-monogamous, unable to commit, and obsessed with sex, which constructed them as untrustworthy and unpredictable partners (Anderson, McCormack & Ripley, 2013; Eliason, 2000; Mclean, 2008). My informant Nam's refusal to date and even hang out with bisexuals evidently stemmed from these stereotypes: he foresaw an inevitable cat fight with the "cupcakes" in order to win over a non-monogamous, non-committed bisexual man, a risk that he wanted to avoid. Gay men also perceived themselves to lose in such a cat fight with the assumption that bisexual men would "choose the easy way" and marry a woman eventually:

Huy (19, male/bisexual): Some gay guys started talking to me, assuming that I am gay, then when I told them that I am actually bisexual, then they began to have an attitude, they said "well yeah at first I thought you are gay so I talk to you, but now I know you are bisexual, I won't talk to you anymore. After all you will end up marrying a cupcake anyway." That kind of assumption.

Kim (24, female/bisexual): Another prejudice [in the queer community] is that "bisexuals will always choose the easy way". Gay men and lesbians don't want to get into serious relationships with us [bisexuals] because they think that we will always choose to marry straight people in the end, because it's easier. But in reality there are homosexuals marrying straight people, aren't they? To me in relationships there is no such thing as an easy way.

Also stemming from the stereotypes which constructed bisexuals as greedy, promiscuous, and obsessed with sex, another common notion circulating in the queer community characterized bisexual people as cheaters. Two of my lesbian informants characterized being in relationships with bisexuals as potentially "problematic":

> Sen (21, lesbian): if my girlfriend were bisexual, that would be problematic
>
> Hoa (21, lesbian): very problematic
>
> Sen: I think bisexual people are very prone to changing their partners, because their mind goes into two directions, they could have homosexual and heterosexual feelings, so their mind will always change. They are very likely to cheat so I have to think about that if I were to date one.

Callis (2009) noted that the images of gay men and lesbians in Western culture tended to be present as cross-gendered. Citing Hemmings (1997), she wrote: "The stereotypes of the 'mannish woman and effeminate man,' and their correlate 'opposite object choices' allow gender and sexuality to stay coupled" (Callis, 2009, p. 228). However, for bisexuals this connection cannot be made because their gender cannot be matched with their sexuality. Here, Callis (2009, p. 228) uses Butler's matrix of sex/gender/desire to explain how bisexuals cause "gender trouble": their sexuality either causes their gender to be seen as "constantly changing," or does not allow them to become gendered because it does not fit either mode of masculinity or femininity. My interview with two lesbian informants Hoa and Sen revealed this same "gender trouble" caused by the bisexual identity: Sen characterized bisexual mind as "[going] into two directions", assuming that a split in identity (gender) was accountable for bisexuals' attraction for both men and women (sexuality). As Callis (2009) demonstrates, in order for bisexuality to fit into the matrix of sex/gender/desire, they have to be read as "constantly changing" so that their desire at any given time can be said to *predict* their gender. But it is also this notion of "split identity" that causes bisexuals to be characterized as prone to cheating, non-committed, and promiscuous.

It becomes evident that having attraction toward both men and women is not in any way increasing the likelihood of my bisexual informants to find a partner or make them less vulnerable to social stigma. On the contrary, they identify their social experiences as belong to neither the homosexual nor heterosexual world, given that they are perceived as "traitor" to both groups. As Mclean (2008, p.159) argues, "because heterosexuality and homosexuality are constructed as mutually exclusive, bisexuality, as the uncharted 'middle ground', is considered an unacceptable category of sexual identity." My gay informant Nam readily supported this notion by emphasizing that being gay was better than being "in between". This "either straight or gay" binary leads bisexuals to occupy an uncertain position in the queer community, in which their sexuality is questioned and suppressed not only by the straight minority but also by the queer minority.

7.2 Homonormativity and the Queer Hierarchy: Dismantling axes of oppression

In the last section, I have discussed how compulsory monosexuality is enforced across the queer youth of Vietnam, leading to the feeling of alienation experienced by bisexual young people. What I found most notably surprising was how bisexual erasure and biphobia existed even among informants who identified as social activists for the queer community. Quang, for example, was a volunteer activist introduced to me through ICS, while Nam was a well-known blogger in the gay community of Saigon. This leads me to question whether workshops and events about queers such as Viet Pride have fully addressed the needs and interests of bisexual people as equally as the other queer categories. I have reasons to believe that knowledge regarding the oppression against bisexuality has not been widely circulated in this community, which allows room for biphobia, bisexual erasure, and monosexism[14] to dominate the atmosphere. So long as bisexuality is not seen as an authentic desire, bisexual people will not be able to identify themselves with the common voice in the queer community.

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[14] Shiri Eisner (2013) characterized *monosexism* as a social structure enforcing the idea that a person can only be either straight or gay.

It is worth noting that biphobia as well as homophobia and transphobia cannot be addressed in isolation. These issues can only be resolved when the authority of larger social institutions such as heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, and patriarchy are brought into questions. Consequently, if each group in the queer community is only interested in solving its own problem of oppression, it may not be practical to expect a shared, common voice. My fieldwork and interviews revealed that such a common voice did not exist; on the contrary, the Vietnamese queer community was constructed as a hierarchy upon the separations among different queer groups. Chi, a blogger-activist of the lesbian community, shared her opinion on this separation in a rather depressing tone:

> Chi (19, lesbian): They [gay men] still call us [lesbians] "useless cupcake" or call other gay people "cupcake" as an insult. If we don't address gender inequality and discrimination against women, there will always be this gap between gay men and lesbians [....] We don't know anything about each other in this community. Gay men don't know about lesbians, lesbians don't know about gay men, transgender and homosexual people have problems with each other […]

Chi was a bright young activist who constantly challenged the manifestation of patriarchy in the queer community of Vietnam. Throughout the interview, Chi critically examined the activist works of ICS, which she believed had created a "bubble of illusion" about social change in the queer youth community in Vietnam. While ICS emphasized the need to ensure equal rights for LGBT people and to create an open atmosphere for promoting diversity, the organization had not successfully addressed what Chi believed to be the "bigger problem", that is, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and sexism, leading to a lot of divisions within the queer community. While Chi addressed this separation with a sense of urgency, another activist informant looked at this separation as inevitable:

> Hiếu (23, trans-man): Separation takes place in all communities. In a country there is always the rich/poor division, and in a city like Saigon there will separation between people who have different jobs. For example a banker may look down on a street sweeper, not all, but some of them would. The queer community is the same;

it is itself a society and it carries the trace of any society in which some members would look down on the others.

Here, the existence of a classed hierarchy within the queer community was revealed, acknowledged, but also left unchallenged. By placing his understanding of the queer community through the bigger social structures, Hiếu could remain, to use his word, "neutral" about any sign of separation in the community. Hiếu did not see the separation as a sign for contesting to the norms prevalently shared among the queer community that marginalized certain queer groups, but rather, a manifestation of a smaller culture carrying the trace of a larger culture. In this case, the trace of a hierarchy based on class divisions was acknowledge, but reinstated rather than challenged. This attitude toward the divisions as "inevitable" explains how certain norms of the heteronormative, patriarchal, classed society of Vietnam can penetrate into the queer community and even help to reinforce the marginalization in an already marginalized community. In this hierarchy, the queer groups most marginalized will be those whose identities provoke and dispute the validity of heteronormativity, the matrix of sex/gender/desire, and a binary discourse of gender. This explains the overwhelming prejudice against transgender people prevalent in the queer community:

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

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

In the first quote, the transgender body is interpreted through Butler's (1990) matrix of sex/gender/desire. Through this matrix this body is labeled as "weak" and "unnatural" because it does not fit into its expected mode of gender (masculinity or femininity), making it an incoherent, "gender-trouble" body. Likewise, the notion that a gay image can be ruined through the existence of the transgender body reveals that this gay image is maintained through finding coherence between the sexed body and gender. Throughout the interview, Vinh repeatedly confirmed this expectation for sex/gender consistency, emphasizing that a male body needed to be masculine, and vice versa. This in turn supports the underlying notion of gender normativity, which limits the bodies from certain modes of expression. Public acceptance for gay men is then a form of reward for their conformance to heteronormative and gender role institutions, an attribute of homonormativity (Duggan, 2003; Flores, 2013).

The second quote by my lesbian informant Sen interprets the transgender body through an essentialist framework – that is, the popular "born this way" sentiment of queer politics. As previously noted "born this way", as propaganda, carries the potential to further marginalize certain groups in the queer community (Khan, 2015). In this case, the decision to undergo sex-reassignment surgery is perceived as a betrayal to the "original", "born this way" body. The body becomes a permanent site that a person needs to respect and prioritize over their desire to be acknowledged differently. Through the "born this way" sentiment the body is seen as a natural state rather than a site materializing social performance. Rooke (2007) contends that by concealing the performative aspect of the body and the self, the queer habitus, as gendered and classed, can be reconstituted and left unchallenged. Notably also, concealing the performance is central to Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity.

These two comments on the transgender body once again exposed the fundamental notion that construct and reconstitute the queer habitus among the Vietnamese youth, which characterizes the ideal queer identity as essentialist, ("born this way"), cis-gender (so that sex and gender stay coupled), and, as evident from my last section on locating bisexuality,

also monosexual and classed. In the end, a queer hierarchy is arrived from these new queer norms:

> Huy (19, male/bisexual): In this [queer] community, the group that is discriminated against the most is transgender people. Transgender people usually express their gender identity at an early age; many of them have to quit school and cannot find a proper job, so they are not really educated. If someone insults them they will use vulgar language to fight back, to protect themselves. Somehow this creates a bad image for the transgender community. Gay guys, especially, hate transgender people because in our society people are still confused between gay men and transgender women. Also, many transgender women are insulted because of their appearance. Aside from the way they dress, they inject hormones, which can cause negative effects on their body such as having a lot of pimples, making them look quite ugly. You know, not everyone has the kind of money to undergo full surgery like Hương Giang Idol or Lâm Chí Khanh [famous Vietnamese celebrities who are transexual women]. So, let's say we have here a gay man, a lesbian, a bisexual and a transgender, the first one to be pushed out of the group would be the transgender.

> Me: then after that, who would be pushed out next?

> Huy: the bisexuals, then the lesbians. Gay men are the boss in this world (laugh)

Huy was the last informant that I interviewed. Before talking to him, I had already gathered enough data to visualize the existence of a hierarchy among the Vietnamese queer youths. I therefore was not surprised by his configuration of the hierarchy, which was compatible with the *matrix of oppression* that I had visualized. Matrix of oppression is a social paradigm coined by Patricia Hill Collins (2000), addressing the intersectionality of oppression through different axes such as race, class, and gender. I find that this matrix of oppression is also useful to understand the oppression experienced by different queer groups in the Vietnamese queer community, in which the three axes of class, gender/sex,

and sexuality intertwine, define, and divide these identities. This in effect creates a queer hierarchy based upon these three axes of oppression.
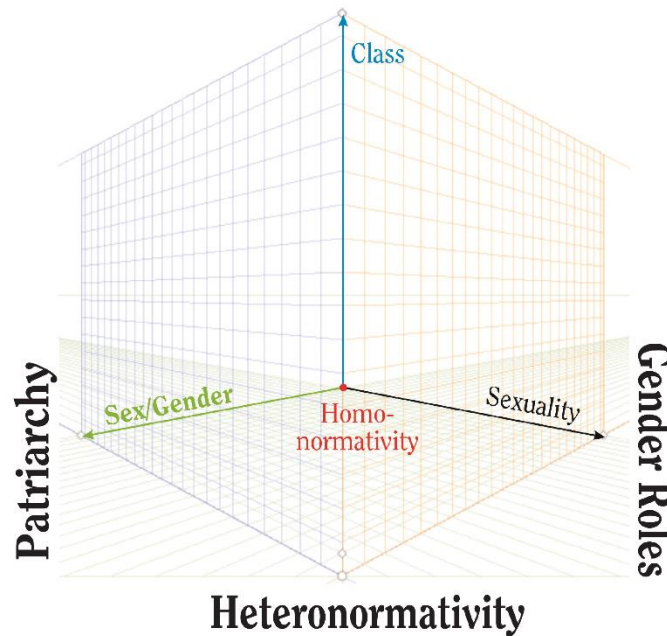

Figure 2. The Matrix of Oppression in the Vietnamese Queer Youth Community

In the model above, class, gender/sex, and sexuality make up each of these axes. The central point constitutes the ideal (homonormative) queer identity, that is, cis-gender, middle or upper class, and monosexual. Any queer identity that deviates from this central measurement is then further marginalized in an already marginalized community, making up a hierarchy based upon sex/gender performance, class, and sexuality. It's also worth noting that this hierarchy is located within a classed, patriarchal society itself, and it carries the norm of this society into the construction and perpetuation of its legitimacy instead of challenging these norms and values. As Duggan (2003) and Flores (2013) note, homonormativity appears as reinforcing the heteronormative social structure, and the public acceptance is built upon the conformance of certain queer identities to this bigger patriarchal, heteronormative culture. In this case, it is the middle-class gay and lesbians that receive the most of public support throughout their quest for equality (Walmsley, 2015).

7.3 But what about the other queers who don't conform to this hierarchy?

In the above sections, I address the different aspects that construct a queer hierarchy existed in the Vietnamese queer youth community. As demonstrated, the queer hierarchy is characterized through class, gender, and sexuality oppression, a field in which the norms of a classed patriarchal society still function and perpetuate unchallenged. Homonormativity is the backbone of this process: through homonormative values, the hierarchy places certain queer identities in the top class (gay men and lesbians) and marginalizes the bodies (transgender) and sexual lives (bisexuals) that challenge the hegemony of the heterosexual matrix.

Acknowledged, the reality seems quite depressing, but that is not all that there is. During my fieldwork, I also met with people whose identities and social relationships challenged the gender/sexual boundaries enforced upon them and transgressed the meanings of queerness. They approached gender roles and sexuality in an imagining, innovative way, through which they defended the marginalized queer groups and pointed out the crack in the system of queer politics. I reserve this space for these few narratives whose identities, bodies, and performance, as I believe, hold the potentials for disrupting the hegemony of homonormativity and for "queering" the queer community.

One of those informants that I fortunately met with was Quốc. At the time, Quốc was a sociology student at a university in Saigon who enjoyed reading Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Serano's books. We have stayed in touch until now. A few months after the interview, Quốc received a scholarship to study in the US, and one day Quốc informed me about the decision to switch major to Philosophy. Honestly I was not at all surprised, given all the things that Quốc said during the interview:

> Quốc (19, gender-queer[15]): I identify as gender queer because I don't think I can put
> myself in any category, whether it is man or woman. It is just uncertain. When

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[15] Gender-queer refers to "a gender variant person whose gender identity is neither male nor female, is between or beyond gender, or is some combination of genders." (Green & Peterson, 2004, p. 4). Because Quốc identifies as gender-queer, I use the pronoun "they" to refer to this informant.

people try to label me as a man/woman, I feel very uneasy. It's just like they try to label me as something that I am not, that I am not completely. I am not completely a male to use the same restroom with males, but I'm also not completely female to use the female restroom. I think a man will feel quite normal with the fact that people label him as male, but I don't. I feel like a part of me is not recognized. It's not totally me, it could be 50% me but not totally. If I agree to live like a male, if I step into a restroom for men, that means I confirm I'm 100% male, but I'm not.

Quốc's answer exposes the notion that gender is only a social performance and that it does not hold any essentialist value to the construction of identity. The act of going to the restroom, as Quốc points out, is an act of consent to labeling: by choosing to go into a restroom separated by gender we reinstate the notion that gender exists as a self-validating category, while in fact the notion that separates people into two distinct genders is itself a social construction. Going into the male or female public restroom then becomes a performance to confirm and reconfirm this notion. Quốc's answer reflects Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of gender performativity, in which the theorist critiques the tendency to separate sex from gender which views sex as a natural essence. For Butler, sex *is* gender, and it is gender that gives sex this internal essence concealed as natural and original. From this theory notions such as male or female, or man and woman, are exposed as only social replicates of an imaginative prototype. This notion is mentioned again later when Quốc discussed a past romantic relationship. Quốc emphasized their belief in an egalitarian relationship, yet playfully they performed roles for their own amusement:

Quốc (gender-queer, 19): from the beginning I decided that I would play the passive role but I would still care for him, to be fair, so even when I played the "damsel in distress" role I still took care of him in my own way to make sure that it's fair. I was just acting, playing a role, you know […] because I found it fascinating. I know it was wrong but I still wanted to go through with it.

Me: why do you think it was wrong?

Quốc: because in a relationship there needs to be fairness. You cannot just expect

one person to be the giver and do everything. But I was just playing that role, like an actor playing a scene. It was wrong but it gave me a lot of excitement.

Quốc's answer revealed the performativity in social roles. As opposed to most other informants who conformed to a gender (giver/receiver) role in their relationships, Quốc regarded the notion of roles as a game. Through this answer, roles did not appear as rigid, essential, or inescapable, but on the contrary, flexible, mutable, and pleasing even. In an interview, Foucault (1984, p. 166) noted that identity categories could be useful if they help people find pleasure and belonging, but they should not be seen as a definite reality or an "ethical universal rule". Quốc's answer perfectly reflects this notion – that roles in relationships can be utilized yet should not be taken more seriously than just a game, and that there is no truth or essence implied in these performative roles.

In my interview with the young blogger-activist Chi, who referred to herself as a "lesbian with a queer mind," the notion of gender as a repeated social performance was also revealed when she raised her voice to defend a marginalized group in the queer community. In this instance, Chi was asked to comment on the fact that many trans-women were described by my other informants as "overdoing femininity, even more than a real straight girl", to which she gave a thoughtful answer:

> Chi (lesbian, 19): If you think of yourself as a certain gender, but your body communicates otherwise, then you will have to express your gender through actions and gestures. These [trans-girls] "overdo" their femininity because they live in a society which pushes them to constantly confirm and reaffirm their gender. The fact that they don't resemble certain ideal types of "real, straight" girls doesn't mean that they are not just that. What does it mean to be a girl anyway? […] Also, I have never heard anyone saying things like "oh god you are too masculine, you are overdoing your masculinity!" There is only femininity that gets attacked in these types of comments. You can only "overdo" femininity. For masculinity, you can never get enough of it.

In this answer, gender appears as not only a performance but also performative: it is through certain performative actions that an identity is acquired and constructed. For this construction to take place, as Butler (1990, 1993) notes, the key is repetition. Chi recognized that transwomen's femininity doing are performative acts, which requires constant repetition, or to use her words, "constantly confirm and reaffirm". Her question [what does it mean to be a girl] exposed the lack of an essence for gender and even sex: an identity (such as a girl) was then revealed as a state of *becoming* rather than being. Through the same answer Chi attacked the bigger patriarchal culture which demeaned any attribute relating to women. Chi's parody using masculinity exposed the unequal standing of genders (through notions of masculinity and femininity) in both the Vietnamese culture and the queer culture. This also explained how trans-women (performing femininity) were more likely than trans-men (performing masculinity) to offend my informants.

Last, I want to use this little space to share a story of a queer couple that I interviewed. On a quick first glance Hà and Mi looked like any normative heterosexual couple (in fact, this was how they instructed me to find them at the coffee shop where we agreed to meet). In reality Hà, in the male body, was a homosexual, transgender woman (she referred to herself as a trans-lesbian) and Mi was a lesbian. Our interview then was revolved the sexed body and gender. At one point Mi stressed that she did not want Hà to undergo sex-reassignment surgery because it could be dangerous for her health. Mi then explained that Hà's male body was not an issue for her sole attraction toward girls:

> Mi (18, lesbian): I already chose to date her, that means that I don't care about this body issue. In my eyes she is a girl. I know there are people who find it difficult to accept, they want to find consistency with the body. But I accept her as a girl. I don't look at her through her body but through the gender she identifies with, and this is enough for me.

Throughout the interview Mi reassured her transgender partner Hà that she saw in Hà a woman. This constant reassurance seemed to make the notion of a sexed body disappear, and that it was Hà's gender which gave meaning to her body (not the other way around!)

Mi's openness allowed the couple to envision getting married and conceiving a child together through heterosexual intercourse. For these narratives, the body was perceived to be only a physical entity rather than a site containing any truth of gender. Similar to Chi's comment above, Mi's answer again redefines what it means to be a woman, or any identity for that matter.

In closing, this chapter is reserved for the narratives of non-mainstream queer identities. This includes groups who have been marginalized by this community through their sexuality and body, as well as those who place themselves out of the heteronormative definition of gender. In this chapter, I also reveal a queer hierarchy constructed upon homonormativity, which creates an ideal queer identity as high class, cis-gender, and monosexual. This places middle-class gay men and lesbian on the top of the hierarchy, while marginalizing queer groups such as the bisexuals and the transgender. This hierarchy limits the potential to develop effective, inclusive dialogues for queer rights while at the same time even legitimizing the stigmatization against certain queer groups.

The end of this chapter is dedicated for the queer minds whose conceptualization of gender not only reveals the performative nature of gender and identity, but also erases the boundary between gender and the body. Through these narratives I have come to see identities in a more flexible, pleasing, and meaningful way – as a game, a performance, a reflection of love and acceptance. I conclude this chapter with a comment of a queer informant:

> Du (23, queer): Categories like LGBT has very little to do with who you are. [Your sexuality or gender] is only an attribute, but not your whole identity. Each individual will have their own personality, and we should respect that rather than defining them within a rigid model of identity.

8. Concluding Chapter: Rethinking Post-Colonial Queer Identities

In this concluding chapter, I will revisit my research questions in conjunction with the findings of this thesis. I will then position these findings within the context of post-colonialism and address how the everyday construction of identities for young Vietnamese queers is intricately tied to a Western model of identity construction. Last, I will discuss the limitations of this study as well as the emergence of future research that the study implicates.

8.1 Research Questions and Summary of Findings

This research study was initially set out to explore how the Vietnamese queer youth conceptualize their identity in a changing social environment where social acceptance for queerness begins to replace shame and stigmatization in the context of Vietnam. Throughout my fieldwork process, however, more findings emerged in relations to this self-conceptualization that eventually led to the final construction of this thesis. The two main research questions for this thesis, listed below, were founded after the emergence of these new developments in the fieldwork process:

RQ 1: How does an essentialist self-conceptualization drive the gender performance of queer youth in Vietnam?

RQ 2: What constitutes the habitus shared by the queer youth in Vietnam?

The key findings of these two research questions were addressed in three analytical chapters: Chapter 5, which focused on essentialism in the conceptualization of queerness; Chapter 6, which discussed the interplay of class with gender and sexuality; and Chapter 7, which gave a model of three axes of oppression that create a hierarchy in the queer community of Vietnam. In this section I will synthesize these key findings in relations to the two research questions.

(RQ1) From Essentialist Self to Performative Self

The majority of my informants turned to essentialism, instead of constructionism, to seek explanation for their queer identity. Queerness was then constructed as natural,

unchangeable, and consequently self-validating for its naturality. Foucault (1978) referred to this notion as "reverse discourse" – when a marginalized population adopted the same medical discourse that was once stigmatizing them to validate their existence and interests. In the context of Vietnam, reverse discourse using essentialism to explain queerness was commonly deployed by many activist organizations such as ICS and ISEE to advance their cause for LGBTQ equal rights. Essentialism was proven to be an effective framework to conceptualize queerness if the goal was to achieve public acceptance, evidenced by the positive social change in Vietnam that these organizations had made thus far.

However, as my informants instilled their understanding of self within an essentialist category, this category also became "the code of their existence" (Foucault, 1984, p. 166). For many informants, this meant that they needed to adopt practices to fit into these new identity categories to become culturally intelligible inside Butler (1990)'s matrix of sex/gender/desire. A performative self was then driven out of their essentialist conceptualization of self; for example, my gay informants shared with me their effort to act in a more masculine manner to fit with the cultural image of gay men. The binary relationship model comprised of a masculine dominant and a feminine figure was widely adopted and embraced, with an expectation for coherence and stability between my informants' gender expression and the sexual/mental roles that they held in their relationships. Sub-categories such as top/bottom and butch/femme were then indicating both gender expression and gender roles in a queer relationship. Following this binary model strictly led some homosexual informants to, paradoxically, pursue relationships that resemble a heterosexual model and even to dramatize their gender performance in order to attract potential partners.

Central to the construction of a contemporary queer identity for these Vietnamese young people is the notion of homonormativity, a concept coined by Duggan (2003) referring to practices in the queer community that, instead of challenging or disrupting heteronormativity and gender roles, end up endorsing these same norms. In this study, homonormativity is revealed through the conformity and replication of heteronormative

norms which characterize an ideal queer body as gender normative, and an ideal queer relationship as sustaining heterosexual roles. The only difference between homonormativity and heteronormativity lies in the sexual object choice: while heteronormativity contends that only a heterosexual relationship sets the norm, homonormativity allows same-sex relationships to be viewed as also "normal". This translation does not in any way address or critique the institution of heteronormativity which sustains the notion of a "natural" role applying for each gender and the tendency to assume gender through sex. Consequently, the upholding of homonormativity leads to the marginalization of certain queer groups who do not fit into its model of gender normativity, which seeks coherence between a sexed body and gender identity. Transgender people, as a group, are increasingly marginalized in the Vietnamese queer community due to this maintenance of homonormativity.

In closing, by conceptualizing their identities as fixed and natural, my informants then engage in performative practices to legitimize and support their belonging in the chosen queer category that they perceived to be natural. They take in a new social reality with new rules and codes of conduct written on the queer identity. During this process, they also adopt a heterosexual model in their relationships, sustaining the dominance of heterosexual norms even within the queer community.

(RQ2) From Queer Habitus to Queer Hierarchy: Class, Gender, and Sexuality as Axes of Oppression

In this study, the queer habitus was constituted through gender, sexual desire, and class. The body became the materializing site for the interplay between these markers, giving different queer bodies different social values. Gay men seemed to set the tone for the construction of this habitus; as a group, they pursued middle-class dispositions and embraced the notion of taste in the formation of their identity. Class taste was reflected through their pursuit of cultural beauty, whether through a masculine, gender normative body or through the way they dressed and conducted themselves in public. Their classed selves also implied a moral value into the queer identity, with a dichotomy between the "acceptable" queers, seen as moral, rightful citizens who contributed to the Vietnamese

society, versus the low-class queers whose "dubious" morality and self-presentation posed a threat to the legitimation of the queer community as a whole. This dichotomous characterization was revealed through gay men's contempt toward the transgender bodies, as these bodies contested to the normative construction of "a stable sex expressed through a stable gender" (Butler, 1990, p.151). By depicting the transgender bodies as "half-way", "unnatural", and even "dirty", my gay informants established themselves as classed, natural, and moral subjects, while reinforcing homonormativity and the notion of a coherent sex/gender body as a prerequisite to become culturally intelligible. Dichotomy was established again when my gay informants positioned themselves in opposition to "the straight people," characterizing this group as tedious, boring, and unsophisticated. Altogether this created an ideal image of a queer identity as culturally beautiful, gender normative, high class, cosmopolitan, and tasteful subjects – with gay men being the main representation.

The queer habitus was also constructed upon the notion of a homonormative sexual desire which enforced compulsory monosexuality. In this perspective, bisexuals were stigmatized as confused, promiscuous, unreliable, and consequently, undesirable. In some case my informants even resorted to bisexual erasure through their emphasis that bisexuality did not truly exist. Such contestation against the bisexual identity revealed how Butler's matrix of sex/gender/desire was constantly enforced in the Vietnamese queer community as the main framework of conceptualizing identities. Bisexuality caused serious "gender trouble" for this framework as it disrupted the notion that gender could predict sexuality. As Callis (2009) contended, for a bisexual identity to become culturally intelligible gender would need to be constantly changing in accordance with the bi-sexuality. By causing this interruption in the matrix of sex/gender/desire, bisexuality was detested by the other queer groups, mostly made of gay men and lesbian. This, again, revealed how homonormativity functioned as the main framework against which a queer identity was measured. In the Vietnamese queer community, this framework created separation among different queer groups: as they reinforce gender and sexual norms replicated from the heterosexual

hegemony they began to act as "ultimate conformists" who contested against sexual lives that fell out of this rigid framework.

Altogether, this queer habitus led to the creation of a queer hierarchy based upon class, gender/sex, and sexuality. I used the paradigm "matrix of oppression", developed by Collins (2000), to characterize this hierarchy. With class, gender/sex, and sexuality making up the three axes of this matrix, a queer identity is then interpreted through the intersectionality of these axes, leading some queer groups to occupy a more dominant position in the queer habitus while other groups are further marginalized. In this specific hierarchy in the Vietnamese queer youth community, middle/upper class gay men and lesbian are positioned on the top, while bisexuals and transgender people are marginalized due to their sexuality (as non-monosexual) or their body which reveals a disruption in gender and the sexed body, and the lack of (middle-) class dispositions.

To sum up, the Vietnamese queer habitus is a site where class dispositions, gender, and sexuality all intertwine to construct a queer field in which being cis-gender, middle/upper class, and monosexual constitute the ideal queer identity. This habitus explains the lack of a common voice in the queer youth community of Vietnam. Consequently, this community is characterized by fragmentation and separation among different queer groups, leading to the creation of a queer hierarchy that reinforces homonormativity.

8.2 Rethinking Homonormativity and Post-colonial Queer Identities

In the section above, I provided a brief summary of the key findings in this thesis. Central throughout these findings is how homonormativity is adopted as the main framework to define and divide different groups in the Vietnamese queer youth community. Notably, homonormativity as a concept is developed within the Western context of neoliberalism. Using this notion to study how queer identities are conceptualized in Vietnam may seem far-reaching in terms of social context, yet surprisingly homonormativity provides a meaningful look into the construction of these Vietnamese identities and even explains how separation between the different groups of this community take place. A critical look at

how queer identities are (re)constructed in the Vietnamese queer politics seems to shed light into this matter, though it also reveals an alarming notion of orientalism.

LGBTQ, as an acronym model, is itself a Western notion. In the last decade, this model has been adopted by many activist organizations in Vietnam to advance equal rights for queer people. Because this model does not carry any negative connotation in contemporary discourse, it has been widely accepted and adopted by Vietnamese queer youth who resent the stigma attached to the Vietnamese discourse which labels queers. This eventually leads to new Vietnamese discourse which serves as equivalent terms for Lesbian (Đồng Tính Nữ), Gay (Đồng Tính Nam), Bisexual (Song Tính), Transgender (Chuyển Giới), as well as Heterosexual (Dị Tính), and effectively leads to changes in how gender and sexuality are understood and conceptualized in the Vietnamese culture. For example, a report by UNDP and USAID (2014) noted the emergence of the concept "gender identity" in Vietnam (and celebrated this emergence as a sign of positive changes). Prior to this emergence, there was no distinction between the notions "sexed body", "gender identity", and "sexuality" in Vietnamese; they were all understood under the framework of "giới" [direct translation: gender (but this term was also used when referring to sex and sexuality)]. The emergence of "gender identity" becomes central to queer politics in Vietnam as it separates the *natural* "sexed body" (giới tính sinh học) from the *social* "gender identity" (bản dạng giới) and "sexual orientation" (xu hướng tính dục), and it fits well into the LGBTQ acronym model. In my study, most informants emphasized that "sex", "gender" and "sexual orientation" should be separated, and contended that the old Vietnamese conceptualization of "giới" was problematic as it created the tendency of the Vietnamese public to "get mixed up" between different queer categories.

Although Western knowledge and discourse is fundamental to the creation and continuation of queer politics in Vietnam as evidenced, this increasing use of a "global gay" discourse in Vietnam does not exist without implications. Joseph Massad (2002) points to the use of these Western discourses in the context of non-Western civilizations, and argues how these discourses serve as a means for Western imperialism which attempt to enforce meanings

into the local understanding of queerness. For Massad, global gay right activism can be seen as a conspiracy targeting non-Western civilizations under the name of "liberation" and the notion of rights. My findings reveal a similar tendency, although I do not necessarily view the queer activism in Vietnam as a form of conspiracy. These findings do, however, carry traces of Orientalism, a dangerous assumption that positions East societies against the West in a dichotomy of a backward, un-modern Vietnam versus the civilized, liberating West (Said, 1978). As the cause for queer right activism in Vietnam has been advanced through the use of knowledge and also investment from the Western societies, it is understandable how my informants as a group reject the knowledge developed in the Vietnamese culture, or even characterize these forms of knowledge as "backward". But, as I have showed in this thesis, the conformity to Western discourse of gender and sexuality is not without problem: as my informants rely on homonormativity to construct their self-understanding of queerness, they become also subjects of a consumption culture built upon their own identities, and become agents who police other queer identities through the three axes of class, gender, and sexuality.

This discussion shows how adaptations of Western knowledge and discourse in non-Western societies should proceed with caution. For Vietnamese queer identity politics, the intersectionality between class, gender, and sexuality is an issue that should not be overlooked, as these axes together create a hierarchy that marginalizes certain subgroups of the queer community. In addition, there should also be space to address how patriarchal values and heteronormativity continue to shape the conceptualization of queerness for young Vietnamese. And finally, the fact that these young people have grown up within an open atmosphere susceptible to Western knowledge and ideologies should not be forgotten, as it can easily lead to the dangerous orientalist notion that has an *othering* effect on the Vietnamese local knowledge.

8.3 Limitations, Future Research, and Concluding Remarks
This study looks at how the queer youths in Vietnam conceptualize their identities within an increasingly more accepting social atmosphere. Although the study takes place in the

context of Vietnam, the main theories and concepts that I use to analyze the data are all developed by Western philosophers. This lack of a local theory in guiding the interpretation of the interview data constitutes the main limitation of this thesis; a local theory, with close insights into the Vietnamese society and its history on gender and sexuality, would be more effective in explaining the separation and hierarchy among queers that I found in my interviews. Another limitation comes from the number of informants. Given the limited time frame and the scope of this research, I could not reach out to a larger and more diverse group of participants. In addition, most of my informants are middle-class and educated, and the lack of queer narratives from working-class and less educated backgrounds can certainly compromise the findings of this research. My lack of address of ethnicity in this research also makes the analysis less inclusive.

Through acknowledging these limitations, I have also found ideas for future research emerging. Most notably, the challenge is to begin doing research about queerness in non-Western societies using the local knowledge and frameworks of understanding gender and sexuality. In Vietnam this would mean to "dig" into the local meaning of the notion "giới" which positions sex, gender, and sexual orientation into one unifying conceptualization framework, and into the non-distant past when "đồng tính" [homosexuality] was a local term used to refer to all queer identities. To dig a little deeper this would require researchers to trace back into the long Vietnamese history to find out how the past societies of Vietnam positioned queerness. The Vietnamese local knowledge of queers could also be found in participant with less exposure to Western knowledge and discourse, such as the working-class queers, queers from ethnicity minorities, and the queer youth who have to quit school from an early age due to discrimination. In these queer identities that are left behind, there is the potential to find more local diversity and also resistance to Western-imperialist tendencies.

Finally, I want to use these last few words to apologize to all of my informants, given that I do not have space to represent all of their stories in this thesis. In the construction of this final manuscript, I have to leave out many narratives to ensure a coherent structure for the

thesis, which may not do justice for the rich data that my informants have given me. This is when the imbalance power relationship between the researcher and the informants becomes very clear: even when I try to resolve this imbalance during my interviews, I still have the final power to represent their stories. I am also aware that I appear very critical when representing some of these narratives, a fact that I hope will not become hurtful to any of my informants. I also hope that my critiques toward the works of the two activist organizations ICS and ISEE do not appear as unjust or ungrateful. Thanks to their works, life has become much easier to breathe for my queer friends in Vietnam, and I am very grateful. But perhaps, instead of celebrating, it is time to note that the sexual lives of young people in Vietnam are still very far from any notion of freedom.

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Appendices

Appendix 1:

List of Questions to Guide the Interview (Translated from Vietnamese to English)

1. Introduction about yourself:
   - How old are you? Where do you currently live/study/work?
   - Your family background: what do you parents do for a living? How do you perceive the financial security of your family? Do you follow any religion?
   - Who are the people that have the most influence in your life?
   - Which LGBT group do you identify with and why? How do you define the other groups?

2. Social relationships:
   - Do you know or have friends who come from the queer community in Vietnam? How do you refer to yourself and them?
   - Are you dating someone? If yes, how do you refer to each other? Do you have "roles" in the relationship?
   - Do you share with your friends about issues related to your sexuality/gender?
   - Do you let a lot of people in your life know about your sexuality/gender identity? If yes, how do they react, and does it affect your quality of life? What are the factors that you find most problematic to the coming out experience (or to identity expression) in Vietnam?
   - Do you change your gender expression depending on the environment or the people you are with?

3. How you define/understand these following notions: masculinity/femininity, "being yourself", Gay Pride, roles in relationships, gender expression

4. Discourse: Let's discuss all of the terms that you have heard or used to refer to queerness. Can you list them out and define their meanings? Which terms in the list do you frequently use to address your identity and other queer identities?

5. General discussion: Why do you agree to take part in this study? Do you have any question about the research?

Appendix 2: *Consent Form*

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Yen Mai, from the Faculty of Social Sciences at University of Helsinki. The results will be contributed to a master thesis of the Research Master Programme in Social Sciences.

Procedures and Confidentiality
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer a set of questions regarding your personal history and your understanding of LGBTQ concepts. The interview will take place at Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam and will last from 1 to 1.5 hours. With your permission, the discussion will be recorded solely for the purpose of transcribing the interviews. The information obtained in this study will be kept confidential.

Potential Risks and Benefits
This study involves minimal risks to you. The only foreseeable risk lies in the nature of the study topic, which may touch on some sensitive aspects of your life and evokes emotional discomfort. There are no direct benefits or payments to you for participation in this study. Keep in mind, however, that the information you reveal to this study will be used for a research project that aims at elevating life experiences of LGBT youth in Vietnam.

Rights of Research Subjects
You can choose whether to be in this study or not. You may withdraw your consent at any time during the study. You may also refuse to answer any question. Should you have any question concerning the research, please do not hesitate to contact Yen Mai at yen.mai@helsinki.fi.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT
I understand the procedures and conditions of my participation described above, and I agree to participate in this study.

Name of Subject:
_____

Signature of Subject:
_____

Date: _____