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Original Article

Vietnamese LGBTQ Youth's Transition to Adulthood: Expressions of Agency

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Abstract

The study examines how Vietnamese LGBTQ youth express their agency as they transition to adulthood. Utilizing in-depth interviews with LGBTQ youth between the ages of 18 and 28, the study identifies different forms of strategies these young people employ to define, make sense of, or affirm their gender and sexual identities. In addition to managing their visibility to ensure safety, these youth can make sense of their feelings and experiences through inclusive knowledge about LGBTQ, or they may express themselves publicly and challenge heteronormativity and cisnormativity. The use of social media can give them tools for self-expression and advocacy, while financial independence and mobility can help them negotiate autonomy against normative expectations. As a contribution to LGBTQ emerging adulthood and youth research, the study highlights how social landscapes can limit the choices available for youth's expressions of agency, while simultaneously providing them with materials to exercise control.

Keywords

LGBTQ, Vietnam, youth transition, agency, identity, sexuality, gender

Introduction

Emerging adulthood is a period full of challenges as well as possibilities, characterized by significant role transitions, identity explorations, and changes in relationships (Arnett, 2006). This transitional period is often highlighted by uncertainty, as young people question previously taken-for-granted assumptions and explore new

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possibilities for self-expression and social conduct. Structured by changes in the social, material, and symbolic spheres, the transition to adulthood can facilitate identity transformations and new expressions of agency, as young people rely on newly available resources to help them make sense of their emerging adult identities.

This article investigates Vietnamese LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) youth's transition to adulthood. While this transition poses some degrees of challenges and possibilities for all youth in general, LGBTQ youth particularly face additional risks of experiencing 'minority stress', as they must navigate in oppressive heteronormative social contexts that may hinder both their identity expressions and employability (Torkelson, 2012; Wagaman et al., 2016). Due to such stressors, LGBTQ youth's life trajectories and expressions of agency can differ significantly from their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts. Studying their agency requires scholars to analyse closely the cultural and historical landscape within which their transition takes place, focusing on different resources available to them.

This study investigates how Vietnamese LGBTQ youth express their agency in their transition to adulthood, focusing on different strategies these young people apply to make sense of and affirm their identities. As Wagaman et al. (2016) point out, most research on youth transition to adulthood has been done through a heteronormative lens that ignores the experiences of LGBTQ individuals. Little is understood about the transition to adulthood of LGBTQ youth, especially those in Global South contexts. Filling this gap, this article identifies diverse ways LGBTQ youth can assert their agency despite societal constraints. These strategies involve managing their visibility, resisting heteronormative and cisnormative institutions, and improving their own capacity to act.

Agency in Youth Transition to Adulthood

Emerging adulthood, spanning between the late teens and mid-twenties, is a distinctive period characterized by youth independence from social roles and expectations (Arnett, 2006). Young people's exploration of education, careers, and relationships during this period has been extensively documented in the literature, which highlights that the choices they make are always subject to constraints in their social landscapes (Bynner, 2005; Evans, 2002). To study youth agency meaningfully, we must recognize how structural factors play a deeply pervasive role in determining what future possibilities are available for youth, as well as how these factors shape their identity, goals, and aspirations (Bynner, 2005; Hamilton & Adamson, 2013). For example, Moreno's (2012) study of Spanish youth's prolonged cohabitation in their parents' home identifies the precarious labour market, the shortage of affordable housing, and limited welfare assistance for youth as structural factors that constrain young people's independence and mobility.

A way in which agency and structure can both be accounted for in young people's transition can be seen in the concept *bounded agency* (Evans, 2002) or *situated agency* (Gooding et al., 2023). Both concepts acknowledge how the social contexts in which youth are situated can bind or circumscribe their expressions of agency, while simultaneously offering them materials to establish a sense of agency. When faced with barriers and constraints, a young person's strategy to take control of their lives may involve adjusting their aspirations to fit the context (Evans, 2002), or routinely developing strategies to navigate through challenging dynamics (Gooding

et al., 2023), rather than attempting to change their environment. This is important to acknowledge because marginalized youth usually lack the capacity or resources to change their social contexts. Their choice to adapt their behaviours to strategically cope and thrive from social limitations, hence, should be recognized as a form of agency. For instance, Black youth often overconform when encountering the police, displaying politeness or overly submissive behaviours (Fader, 2011; Fox-Williams, 2019). This strategy to manage risk and ensure self-preservation in the face of police brutality should be regarded as a form of agency. Similarly, in contexts of profound insecurity characterized by armed conflict and sexual violence, young women's commitment to marry a high-ranking commander (Denov & Gervais, 2007) or submission to rape (Stallone, 2022) can be a manifestation of rational calculation and agency, through which they strategically utilize their bodies as resources to protect themselves and their families. In line with these studies, this article moves beyond framing marginalized youth, such as LGBTQ, as helpless victims of their circumstances, but rather as capable agents who strategically utilize available resources to express resistance or resilience.

When studying LGBTQ youth's transition to adulthood, one must also acknowledge how heteronormative spaces can create additional challenges and risks. For instance, having peer relationships and support networks is crucial for youth, but such relationships and networks cannot be fostered or sustained easily for LGBTQ individuals (Wagaman et al., 2016). Moreover, the general lack of understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ identities or the unwillingness of adults to acknowledge LGBTQ youth's particular needs (Schimmel-Bristow et al., 2018) can pose challenges for their identity construction. It is also difficult for them to achieve economic stability, given that heteronormativity continues to govern employability (Torkelson, 2012; Wagaman et al., 2016).

In coping with such external barriers and risks, LGBTQ youth utilize various strategies. They engage in strategic identity management, regulating their visibility to mitigate prejudice and discrimination (Schmitz & Tyler, 2018). This includes making conscious decisions to reveal their identity selectively to only those whom they trust (Hillier et al., 2020), 'test the water' to determine whether people would be receptive to their disclosure (Lasser & Wicker, 2008), or come out first with an affinity rather than an identity (Guittar, 2014). Such effort to control when and how they disclose their identity highlights their sense of autonomy. LGBTQ youth's expressions of agency can also be observed in how they cope with normative pressures around sexuality and gender norms. This involves finding their own safe space and community (Scourfield et al., 2008), such as utilizing online spaces to harness identity-affirming support and build resilience (Austin et al., 2020).

Moreover, LGBTQ youth can resist heteronormativity and cisnormativity in their everyday life (Hillier et al., 2020). By working to queer their institutions (Goodrich & Luke, 2014), embracing their 'queer monstrosity' (Gooding et al., 2023), and educating others about their identities (McBride & Neary, 2021), these young people advocate for changes on behalf of themselves and others, demonstrating a strong sense of autonomy.

These studies suggest that while external factors can limit LGBTQ youth's transition to adulthood, they can apply various strategies to maintain control over this process. Extending this line of research, this article explores the contextual constraints and resources that shape the agency of different subgroups in the Vietnamese

LGBTQ community, offering a more nuanced understanding of LGBTQ youth's diverse needs and strategies in this context of marginalization. As demonstrated in this study, each individual's choice of strategies depends on the resources at their disposal, the concrete situations in which they find themselves, and the aspect of queerness they identify with. To highlight the external challenges and resources relevant to Vietnamese LGBTQ youth, the following section provides an overview of Vietnam's gender and sexuality norms, as well as its LGBTQ policies.

Being LGBTQ in Vietnam

Contemporary Vietnam is considered to have lower homonegativity than other Southeast Asian nations (Manalastas et al., 2017). Religion plays a role in this: while Islam in Indonesia and Roman Catholicism in the Philippines institutionalize the moral exclusion of homosexuality, Vietnam's predominant religions are folk beliefs and Buddhism, both of which are comparatively less punitive towards same-sex relationships (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009). Nevertheless, there still exists strong animosity against LGBTQ people in Vietnamese society, which can be explained by the nation's long and complex history of wartime resulting in varied cultural influences on its construction of gender and sexuality.

Most notably, Confucianism and Taoism have a profound influence on Vietnamese gender and sexual norms. These two Chinese philosophies emerged as prominent educational ideologies during China's long domination in Vietnam, and continue to shape Vietnamese contemporary folk beliefs. Confucianism emphasizes gender roles, sexual dimorphism, and filial duties, while Taoism views the natural order of life as a result of combining opposing yet complementary forces (Nguyễn & Angelique, 2017). Vietnamese family institution is intimately shaped by both philosophies, which promote heterosexual union as the natural order and condemn any identities or relationships deviating from it (Phạm, 2022).

The stigmatization of LGBTQ people can also be traced to Vietnam's 1986 economic reform, which abandoned a centrally planned economy for a market economy. Since this reform, Vietnam's economy has developed rapidly and cultural globalization has taken place causing the Vietnamese state to shift its focus from controlling people's economic activities to controlling their behaviour. By regulating a rhetoric of propriety and impropriety, the state establishes itself as the gatekeeper of traditional values, protecting the people from unwanted foreign influences (Wilcox, 2000). In 1996, the state launched the Social Evils Campaign to condemn drug addicts, sex workers, and homosexuals, who were associated with capitalism and Western moral degradation that threatened Vietnamese ways of life (Horton & Rydström, 2019). After this came the ban on same-sex unions in 2000, and the ban on sex-reassignment surgery for those with fully developed reproductive organs in 2005.

These laws were overturned shortly a decade later, with the decriminalization of same-sex unions in 2014 and the legalization of sex-reassignment surgery that took effect in 2017 (Mai, 2017). While these legal changes still have their setbacks (for instance, the state no longer bans same-sex weddings but does not recognize these unions legally either), they nevertheless reflect a more accepting attitude towards LGBTQ people. A demonstration of public support for homosexual relationships can be seen in the success of the campaign 'Tôi đồng ý' [I agree], which received over a

million supporting votes for legalizing same-sex marriage in the summer of 2022. In the same year, Vietnam's Ministry of Health declared that homosexuality is not a disease, and proposed drafting a law on gender transformation that allowed transgender people to have full rights and civic obligations (Snell, 2022).

A number of factors associated with increased globalization can explain such dramatic changes in Vietnamese public attitudes, namely the diffusion of foreign mass media, easier access to the internet, and increasing migration that facilitates the exchange of ideas. These factors have led to alternative perspectives on gender and sexuality – ones that validate LGBTQ identities and challenge Confucian gender norms (Mai, 2017; Pham, 2022). Furthermore, this change in the societal sphere is a result of Vietnamese LGBTQ activists' strategic approach to social change, which focuses on transforming Vietnamese cultural framings of LGBTQs by spreading inclusive knowledge and introducing positive LGBTQ narratives into the mainstream media (Faludi, 2016). Their strategy has successfully elevated public perceptions of LGBTQ people—from 'social evils' to human beings worthy of the same rights and recognition as cisgender, heterosexual individuals (Pham, 2022). This approach is similar to that adopted by Singaporean sexual minorities, who try to garner legitimacy by highlighting their similarities with the straight minority (Jung, 2021). In both campaigns, 'pragmatic resistance' (Chua, 2012) is adopted, which effectively elevates the social standing of the LGBTQ minorities, yet also leaves the legitimacy of the authoritarian state and certain gender norms intact.

Given the significant achievement that improved living conditions for Vietnamese LGBTQ in just over a decade, Vietnam offers fertile ground to explore the life experiences of LGBTQ youth who were born in the late 1980s and 1990s. In childhood, this cohort witnessed extreme stigmatization, while their transition to adulthood coincided with significant changes in Vietnamese laws and society. Such changes in infrastructures allow new gender and sexual practices to emerge, shaping new strategies for these young people.

Method and Data

The study utilizes data from in-depth interviews with 17 Vietnamese people who identify as LGBTQ. I selected informants who were between 18 and 28 (at the time of the interview), which I identify as emerging adulthood. The interviews were conducted in 2014, a momentous period in Vietnamese LGBTQ history characterized by increasing societal acceptance for LGBTQ (following the first Pride in 2012, same-sex unions were decriminalized in 2014).

The recruitment of informants took place through two channels. Prior to travelling to Vietnam, I contacted a Vietnamese non-profit organization working on LGBTQ equality and explained my research objectives. My email was forwarded to the LGBTQ youth who volunteered at the organization; six agreed to help me with the interviews. Additionally, I recruited informants through snowball sampling from my own personal network. Having grown up in Vietnam, I have an extended network in the field, which made finding informants easier. Even so, unforeseen changes occurred during this process: while all the individuals I contacted agreed to participate, one changed their mind last minute fearing their family would find out about their identity. The meeting was cancelled as per their request.

All interviews were conducted in person with a semi-structured format. In addition to using a list of questions to guide the interviews, I also encouraged the informants to speak freely. In this way, the interviews resembled 'guided conversations', and each interview was tailored to the informant's needs: some spoke about relationship challenges, while others discussed growing-up struggles. Semi-structured interviews are ideal for investigating personal narratives, as they ensure the data collection meets the research objective and provide flexibility, allowing interviewees to address concerns that matter to them (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

In my email correspondence with the informants, I requested they choose the location for the interview (usually a coffee shop) to ensure they felt comfortable. In preparation for the interviews, I explained the research topic, which examines how Vietnamese LGBTQ youth construct their identities and relationships, as well as their rights as research informants. All informants have given me consent to record and present their narratives. In all research outputs, I refer to them by pseudonyms. Identifying information like their location, workplace, and school are also omitted.

My research findings are based on thematic analysis of data collected from interviews, coding what they say into themes and selecting those most relevant to the research objectives. In this article, the focus is on the strategies these youth employ in their transition into adulthood at a time of rapid societal changes. All interview excerpts featured below have been translated from Vietnamese to English.

Findings

The findings are structured into three subsections, featuring excerpts from four homosexual men: Quang (21, student), Long (23, accountant), Phan (23, florist), Lê (23, illustrator); two homosexual women Thủy (19, student/activist), Nga (21, student); one bisexual man Vũ (20, student); two bisexual women Huyền (22, student), Chi (25, medical lab assistant); one transgender woman Vân (23, recent graduate/activist); four transgender men Nguyên (19, student/activist), Bảo (20, student/activist), Minh (23, teacher/activist), Thiên (28, music DJ); and one genderqueer informant Hạnh (23, junior creative/activist). The age described here is the informant's age at the time of the interview.

Manage Identity and Visibility

In anticipation of negative reactions, most informants report taking proactive measures to manage their queer visibility in various situations. It is not uncommon for these informants to choose not to 'come out' or not to show their queerness to avoid threats or harm. They can use self-censorship and deception to conceal their identity or selectively share their identity depending on who they talk to.

Conceal

Most homosexual informants conceal their sexuality or attempt to pass as heterosexuals. The act of hiding one's identity does not necessarily imply passiveness;

rather, it showcases agency and resilience while ensuring safety when one is in a vulnerable position. Nga (21, lesbian) shares:

> I have to hide everything, in general I'm not open at all, when I go home (to my parents) I act very different compared to when I'm sitting here. I have to act more feminine.

Nga conceals her sexuality by maintaining an appearance of conforming to traditional gender norms. In her interview, the family emerges as an institution embedded in heteronormativity. In addition to the family, some workplaces are also described as unsafe and unfriendly to LGBTQ individuals. Long (23, gay man), working in a chemical manufacturing company, explains his reason for concealing his sexuality:

> In my workplace, for example if you are a man, people would ask 'do you have a girlfriend?' rather than 'do you have a boyfriend or a girlfriend?'. So [telling them about my relationship] will not be good for me, people can gossip bad things and I can become the butt of their jokes.

Long's experience at work reflects how the assumption of heterosexuality is the underlying norm in social interactions, and how heteronormativity is produced in everyday conversations (Kitzinger, 2005). Such encounters inform him that the workplace is not an inclusive space and thus concealing his sexuality becomes his strategy to preserve reputation. Similarly, Hạnh (23, genderqueer) stresses that 'in some environments you should keep certain things to yourself because revealing it will cause troubles'.

The practice of concealment is clearly more common among non-heterosexual individuals since they can conceal their attraction more easily than transgender individuals can conceal their gender expressions (Statham & Scuzzarello, 2023). While this is the case, concealment can also be employed by transgender youth who attempt to pass as cisgender and heterosexual. When Nguyên (19, transgender man) was 17, his Catholic parents found out about his relationship with a girl and his use of a chest binder. They trapped him in the house with all means of communication cut off and forced him into conversion therapy. To regain freedom, Nguyên resorted to concealment:

> I had to try to remain calm, it's like 'going back into the closet'. I told them I'm not like that at all. I even pretended to date my male best friend to convince them. Finally, they allowed me to leave the house. I took the opportunity to find a job to help me move out soon after.

Oppression and surveillance from the family led Nguyên to self-regulate and manage his visibility. He strategically bypasses his family's disciplinary power (Gooding et al., 2023; Lasser & Wicker, 2008) and got himself out of an unsafe situation by adopting an outward appearance of conformity with cisnormative and heteronormative expectations. Concealing here as a strategy allows him time to prepare, move out, and establish his independence, contributing significantly to his transition to adulthood.

Share Selectively

In environments that LGBTQ youth perceive as safe and non-stigmatizing, they can choose to reveal and affirm their sense of self. They can do so by using cultural

symbols of Pride as a means of visibility management (Lasser & Wicker, 2008); for instance, Quang (21, gay man) reveals his sexual attraction to those curious about his Pride bracelet:

> I wear a bracelet, the one with rainbow colors. When people ask me 'why are you wearing this bracelet, do you know what it represents?' I would tell them 'I wear it because I'm gay'. If people ask, I would tell, but I'm not making that information public. I'm not declaring on Facebook that I'm interested in men or anything.

Quang believes that the rainbow symbol is a relatively new cultural prop in the Vietnamese context, and only those who care about LGBTQ rights recognize the meaning behind it. Therefore, he uses the bracelet as a nonverbal strategy of communicating his sexuality with a selective group of potentially open-minded audiences.

Selective sharing also occurs when youth feel that only a certain aspect of their identity is accepted. In particular, my bisexual informants strategically use a 'customizing' approach in their interactions with others to disguise their bisexuality and manage potential risks of being outcasts. Huyền (22, bisexual woman) explains:

> When I'm in a heterosexual environment, I don't show my homosexual aspect. I usually don't talk about my attraction towards girls with my heterosexual friends, even with people I've come out to because they wouldn't be interested. Likewise, in the LGBT environment, I would show my homosexual side more. I wouldn't talk about my relationship with my boyfriend, so that I wouldn't feel out of place.

Duggan (2003) coins the term 'homonormativity' to refer to the privileging of heteronormative ideals and constructs onto LGBTQ culture and identity. Homonormativity is predicated on the assumption that the norms and values of heterosexuality should be replicated and performed among LGBTQ people. Due to the endorsement of homonormativity in the Vietnamese LGBTQ scene, transgender and bisexual individuals are often stigmatized by gay men and lesbians, who maintain that being cisgender and monosexual are more acceptable queer representations (Mai, 2017). Aware of such stigmatization, Huyền selectively shares different aspects of her sexuality in her interactions to avoid potential ostracization. Likewise, Vũ (20, bisexual man) explains his motivation:

> I was chatting with this gay guy and told him that I am bisexual. He then started sending me insulting messages, saying that I am such a slut. People tend to equate my attraction for both men and women with being in a relationship with both a man and a woman at the same time. I get so scared of gay people (laugh) sometimes I have to say I'm gay so I don't get stigmatized, it may sound ridiculous but it's true.

Vũ is aware of stereotypes attached to bisexuality, which portray bisexual people as perverted, non-monogamous, untrustworthy partners who need to date both sexes simultaneously (Anderson et al., 2013; Mclean, 2008). To avoid the risks of harm, he introduces himself as homosexual on most occasions and only reveals his bisexuality in LGBTQ community events because he believes these events 'respect diversity and inclusion', and can be a safe space for him to express his sexuality.

This section features visibility management as one of the strategies adopted by Vietnamese LGBTQ youth in their transition to adulthood. While self-regulation behaviours can appear restrictive, they can also be affirming as LGBTQ youth do so with a high degree of awareness (Gooding et al., 2023). By proactively making choices to limit their visibility and exposure, LGBTQ youths can create a sense of safety when interacting with non-accepting others, while maintaining their sense of self and dignity. Thus, these strategies emphasize their agency and resilience, especially when they are in vulnerable or unsafe situations.

Resist Cisnormativity and Heteronormativity

Resistance to heteronormativity and cisnormativity is another strategy Vietnamese LGBTQ youth employ during their transition to adulthood. Many of them rely on knowledge that promotes diversity in sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (SOGIE), which enables them to make sense of their queerness without stigma. Moreover, they resist normative gender and sexuality institutions by expressing themselves and their relationships publicly, and by seeking to alter the perception of others about LGBTQ people. These strategies are similar to what Hillier et al. (2020, p. 398) refer to as 'empowerment or boldness strategies', through which these youth demand respect and resist both internalized and externalized oppression.

Utilize SOGIE Terminology

Generally, my informants distinguish between how non-heterosexuality and transgenderism are discussed in Vietnamese mainstream media versus in SOGIE terminology, which they learn independently from the internet and activist organizations. Chi (25, bisexual woman) identifies the mainstream media as 'the biggest obstacle' for Vietnamese LGBTQ due to stigmatizing portrayal:

> Press and radio publications containing accurate information about the LGBT community are rare. Many newspapers portray homosexuality as a cause of crime, even though the number of crimes committed by homosexual people is relatively low. They are also written in a very discriminatory manner, creating a negative image of LGBTQ people.

Previous studies support Chi's observation, showing that the LGBTQ community is often depicted in negative and stigmatizing terms in Vietnamese mainstream media; for instance, homosexual relationships are often portrayed as an immoral, selfish lifestyle (ISEE & Academy of Journalism and Communication, 2011), while the transgender bodies are often the subject of mocking in media outlets (Đinh, 2015). Prior to the popularization of the internet, the main source of knowledge concerning queerness (with no distinction between different subgroups) could be found in the 2005 Vietnamese Encyclopedic Dictionary, which associates this population with the AIDS pandemic, sexually transmitted diseases, and moral perversion (Phạm, 2022). This pathologized characterization of queerness, coupled with the lack of informed discussion on the subject and negative press coverage, contributes to the unchallenged stigmatization against this population. To tackle such stigma,

Vietnamese LGBTQ activist organizations introduce more inclusive knowledge about LGBTQ, such as SOGIE terminology, to the public, aiming at changing the public discourse surrounding this population (Mai, 2022; Faludi, 2016). SOGIE terminology offers an alternative knowledge space that challenges the heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions at the core of the Vietnamese mainstream understandings of gender and sexuality. It is highly valued by my homosexual informants:

> Now I have had time to digest information about LGBT. I understand that being LGBT is natural and normal. (Long, 23, gay man)
>
> When I moved here for university, I attended some courses on SOGIE. Now I have no problems defining who I am […] I know there's nothing wrong with me. (Quang, 21, gay man)

Both informants express that their agency was once 'bounded' by the lack of language and concepts (in Vietnamese mainstream understanding of sexuality) that can explain simultaneously their attraction for men *and* their desire to be seen as a man. This led them to feel misunderstood, self-doubting, and isolated when growing up. Educating themselves on the subject of SOGIE terminology and, by extension, believing in sexual and gender diversity, helps them deal with the distress caused by homophobia and normative pressures around gender expression (Scourfield et al., 2008). Furthermore, SOGIE terminology distinguishes between sexuality and gender identity, which eliminates the confusion my homosexual informants once had as they now know the difference between homosexual and transgender. Thus, they adopt SOGIE terminology when referring to different queer groups instead of using the generic label 'pê-đê', a term that has been long adopted by the Vietnamese public to describe anyone deviating from gender and sexuality norms, often in derogatory manners (Ly et al., 2020; Trần, 2014). Likewise, Vũ (20, bisexual man) finds SOGIE terminology helpful to make sense of his attractions for both sexes, amidst a context where monosexuality is the norm:

> When I was in high school, the internet became popular. More sources of knowledge became available […] That's how I could identify myself as bisexual. Before that, I just went with the flow, people referred to us [LGBTQ] as 'pê-đê' so I thought I was pê-đê, then when there was a bit more information, I thought I was gay. But I also like girls. After reading about LGBT knowledge, I figure out I am bisexual.

Vũ's narrative points to an exploration process as he tries on different labels to find one that best fits his experiences, demonstrating how having the tools to articulate one's experiences is vital. While these examples featured youth with non-heterosexuality, previous studies also indicate that having the language to accurately describe one's discordance with one's assigned sex is highly valuable for transgender individuals, as it is a tool to help them find support and navigate the complexities of their gender identity (McBride & Neary, 2021; Schimmel-Bristow et al., 2018). My interview with Minh (23, transgender man) suggests that having access to the right type of knowledge can help tackle the common phenomenon of gender dysphoria and body dissatisfaction found in transgender youth (Peterson et al., 2017):

> As a teenager, I hated my body. I used to smoke and drink a lot. I acted recklessly. I didn't care if my body got injured. When I turned 20 or 21, my awareness grew. I began to have some self-control and take better care of myself […] For transgender people, the body we were born into is like a prison. It took me a long time to realize, until the day you are released from that prison, you have to love the prison itself. If you don't, you will never receive the release certificate.

Using SOGIE terminology, Vietnamese LGBTQ youth gain a sense of empowerment as they are given the language to share their experiences with others, advocate for their own rights, and arrive at self-acceptance. It is this kind of knowledge that constitutes a queer counter-public (Torkelson, 2012) in which heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions can be questioned and decentred, allowing LGBTQ youth to embrace critical, embodied knowledge that is often rendered invisible or pathological by dominant power structures (McBride & Neary, 2021). As such, making sense of one's sexuality and gender identity through SOGIE terminology can be seen as an expression of agency: to articulate one's identity in a way that is not only meaningful and validating for oneself but also defying cisnormativity and heteronormativity.

Express Oneself

While most informants acknowledge the prejudice against LGBTQ in Vietnamese society, a few of them are unafraid of expressing their sexuality or gender identity publicly. In expressing themselves, these individuals engage in an act of outward resistance against heteronormativity and cisnormativity, demonstrating that LGBTQ people have a right to claim their space in the public eye. Phan (23, gay man) shares that he's not hesitant to express his sexuality in public:

> When I go out with my boyfriend, I can comfortably hold his hand and even kiss him. No matter what anyone says, in my mind my feelings are more important. I'm not doing anything wrong, I have the right to hug and kiss my boyfriend. It's my business. Like in a way I really look down on those people, they have no rights to judge me. I even find them pitiful in the sense that they are so outdated.

By characterizing potential homophobic reactions as out of touch with modern society and its values, Phan implies that such reactions are invalid and should be disregarded. He asserts his rights to public expression and defies compulsory heterosexuality by constructing homosexuality as a feature of modernity.

Thiên (28, transgender man) recalls a time when he handled negative reactions for violating traditional gender expression successfully:

> If you're confident about yourself then people would stop talking because most people don't want confrontation. Like the other day, I wore a man's shirt and my mom asked me 'why are you wearing this?' and I just said 'so what?' and she just shut up.

As Thiên overtly challenges his mother's endorsement of gender expression norms, he exhibits direct resistance to cisnormativity. While Thiên succeeds in preventing his mother from controlling how he dresses, he also acknowledges that his accomplishment may be influenced by the unequal status between masculinity and

femininity, which allows a female-bodied individual to violate gender expression norms more easily than a male-bodied individual. Thiên implies that such outward resistance may work more effectively for him than for a transgender woman.

For Minh (23, transgender man), being out to his family and the public is his way of contributing to the visibility of the transgender community:

> I cut my hair and changed my dressing style to embrace a masculine appearance […] my family was shocked. I just told them: I love girls […] I think there should be a certain number of transgender people coming out to let society know about us. So that they see that we are successful too, we (transgender) are also capable of achieving things like cisgender people do.

Minh strongly believes that because LGBTQ people are portrayed negatively in the media, making himself visible in public is paramount to making the public recognize the existence of the LGBTQ community and its contributions. Minh is not afraid to be open about his gender identity as part of his activism, stating that it creates more accurate and positive representations of this population. Long (23, gay man) expresses similar aspirations, stating that he wants his relationship 'to create a positive representation of a gay couple who is happy and successful', which would, in turn, tackle common misconceptions about homosexual relationships being short-lived and immoral. It is through these personal narratives that Vietnamese activists gradually shift the public discourse on LGBTQs towards a more favourable outlook (Faludi, 2016).

Despite the heteronormative and cisnormative pressures they face in society, these informants assert their right to visibility and recognition by expressing their queer identities and relationships publicly. In being out, demanding to be seen, and seeking respect and recognition for their identity, these youth demonstrate that their society is the one that must change, not them (Hillier et al., 2020). Taking this step is a form of resistance against oppression, as well as an effort to make a difference and reclaim their rightful place in the public sphere.

Change Others' Mindset

Some informants have also attempted to persuade other people to change their mindset about LGBTQ. Bảo (20, transgender man) does so in a confrontational manner:

> My parents' friends asked my sister about me, something like if my parents knew about my 'condition', if they planned to cure my 'illness'. Those people influenced my mother a lot. So, the last time I met them, I said my piece straight to their face. I explained to them that 'this knowledge (about LGBTQ) is real, it's scientific, if you say I have a disease then you're wrong. The real disease here is your trans- and homo-phobia'.

Bảo uses scientific reasoning to make his case, relying on SOGIE knowledge, which he learns from participating in LGBTQ activism. Other informants also report using the information material they gain from activist organizations as a way of legitimizing their argument; for example, Long (23, gay man) shares:

> When I brought up the subject LGBT to my dad, I showed him a few videos made by [an activist organization]. Those are quick introduction videos about who is the LGBT

> community. My dad was like, 'okay I see, so there are people like that', but in the end he still said it's not very natural, he's not completely convinced.

Similar to Long, Huyền (22, bisexual) also tries to persuade her parents to change their view about LGBTQ, using a more gradual approach:

> About a year ago, after participating in LGBT community events, I brought home some friends who had already come out for my parents to get to know them. At first, I didn't mention that they were LGBT, I waited until my parents had already grown fond of them before I brought it up. My parents' perspective has since shifted a bit, but not to the extent that they think being LGBT is completely acceptable.

Trying to convince one's parents to accept queerness is a common topic of discussion in most interviews. For most informants, this remains a challenging task, given the deeply entrenched traditional values and beliefs about gender and sexuality in Vietnamese society. Moreover, insufficient education on the subject tends to leave unchallenged stigmatization of queerness as a disease or an immoral, selfish lifestyle. Aware of such challenges, these youths employ different strategies to start the conversation about LGBTQ, whether by confronting heads-on or evoking sympathy and acknowledgement. Their effort to correct the adults in their lives, to 'turn conflict into teachable moments' (Hillier et al., 2020, p. 393), and to advocate for the inclusion of LGBTQ people into the Vietnamese society is a clear exhibition of agency, demonstrating their desire to exercise control over their lives and their resistance against cisnormativity and heteronormativity from a marginalized positioning.

Increase Capacity for Agency

Although most informants manage their visibility to some degree, they also find moments or contexts where they can increase their autonomy and embrace their identity. This takes place as a result of relocating, becoming financially independent, or utilizing online space.

Relocate

In youth transition to adulthood, the place of residence provides ingredients for their expressions of agency, contributing to how they make sense of life transitions (Juvonen & Romakkaniemi, 2018). Acknowledging the importance of place suggests that physical mobility, such as migration, constitutes a form of resource that shapes identity-making and agency. For instance, relocating to tourist zones is a common strategy adopted by transgender and gay men in Thailand, as such zones provide the social infrastructures and countercultural norms that support specific forms of nonheteronormative living (Statham & Scuzzarello, 2023). In my interviews with a few informants who had a chance to study abroad, migration emerges as a social opportunity to increase one's agency. Thủy (19, lesbian) shares:

> When I turned 17, I convinced my mom to send me abroad to study. She let me go, I think it's because she believed sending me over there would distance me from my girlfriend at that time and help 'turn me straight'. I was relatively happy in the US.

Thủy's transition to adulthood is characterized by migrating abroad, which helps her not only to establish distance from family expectations but also offers her access to new educational infrastructures. She describes her experience in Vietnamese high school as a period of boredom and alienation, a consequence of a system demanding conformity and memorization, contrasting it with the period of studying abroad when she found 'the freedom to learn'. This period gives her access to a form of symbolic resources that brings forth the capacity to take action.

Likewise, Thiên (28, transgender man) discusses how moving abroad at age 15 helped him reconcile his gender identity:

> When I moved to New Zealand, I once stumbled across an article about a transgender man. That person's story resonated deeply with me. I thought, maybe this is what I want, this is [who] I am.

Thiên moved from Vietnam before the thriving of LGBTQ activism, when stigmatizing representations still dominated Vietnamese public understanding of its LGBTQ population. His placement in a different cultural setting allowed him access to a narrative that humanized transgender people, something not available in Vietnamese institutions at the time. The change in physical reality also offers him a venue to explore and confirm his identity:

> In New Zealand, I lived far away from my parents, so I could wear whatever I wanted and have whatever hairstyle I liked. I looked exactly like a boy. One day I went to the bank and they referred to me with a male pronoun. It was the happiest moment of my life.

As Thiên's narrative illustrates, mobility opens up a cultural space that accepts non-normative gender and sexuality, providing him with the opportunity to experiment and pursue his idealized self-presentation. This autonomy becomes critical to his identity construction.

In some cases, relocation does not necessarily involve migration out of Vietnam; as Minh (23, transgender man) enters college, he makes use of the shift in context (from high school to college) where the gaze of former expectations no longer exists:

> I embraced the new image as I entered the university. None of my classmates said anything because it was a new environment, and nobody knew the old me. They just got used to seeing my new image, and no one made any remark.

Minh's ability to 'embrace the new' corresponds to a shift in the environment in which societal expectations for his gender expression have not been formed, allowing him to actualize his gender identity. The inability to move out from his parents' house does not hinder him from establishing identity autonomy; Minh utilizes the change of social audience to get a fresh start and 'try on' his desired identity. The relocation from high school to college offers a timely opportunity for him to experiment and perform his idealized gender identity, through which a new identification can emerge.

Become Financially Independent

Achieving financial independence is a goal for many informants, who believe that such independence will allow them to attain their desirable identity and agency. My transgender informants emphasize this goal especially, since they cannot disguise their identities like homosexual or bisexual individuals and are more likely to face rejection from family and society. For Nguyên (19, transgender man) who was trapped inside his parents' home after being outed involuntarily, having enough money is the prerequisite to move out of an unsafe situation. For Thiên (28, transgender man), financial autonomy is a symbolic resource to help him negotiate for self-expression autonomy:

> My parents don't care about how I dress anymore. After moving out, I have been working and supporting myself just fine for 3 years, maybe my parents can see that I have no problems integrating into society, that people accept me, so they feel secure now. They are no longer afraid that I will be a loner, so they let me do whatever I want.

Financial autonomy is also crucial for Minh (23, transgender man) who plans to pursue gender transitioning:

> I want to foster a masculine self-image. I pay for my own clothes and shoes, so no one in the family said anything. I have plans for surgery and I will save up and do it myself, I don't ask for financial help from anyone so it wouldn't matter if my family knows about it or not.

Furthermore, financial autonomy is mentioned as a way of increasing one's status in the family, thus giving more weight to one's voice. Quang (21, gay man) sees financial independence as a means to facilitate the dialogue with his family about his sexuality:

> I want to come out after I have found a stable job, to show my parents that I can take care of myself and my family. My voice will have more weight then. If I come out now, I don't think I can convince my parents because they would think that I'm still young, immature, and impulsive. I want that (coming out) moment to be the time when they see me as trustworthy, so they are more receptive.

Quang's plan to prepare for coming out is a form of 'bargaining': by achieving financial security and contributing to his family, Quang believes he can gain symbolic status, which in turn reduces the stigma attached to being gay. Lê (23, gay man) implies the same thing when he states financial autonomy would 'make people respect me for me, not about my sexuality'. These narratives are on par with the experiences of queer people in the Philippines, who feel the need to prove their worth to their families through financial contributions (Garcia, 2021; Presto, 2020). Such similarity can be attributed to the shared values in Vietnamese and Filipino culture, both emphasizing respect for elders, filial duty, and the importance of financial contributions as a sign of respect. In such settings, LGBTQ youth fulfil their financial obligations to the family as a strategy to gain acknowledgement and legitimacy for their identities.

Utilize Online Spaces

Using online spaces is another strategy LGBTQ youth adopt to act autonomously. Social media platforms and the internet are unique, life-saving spaces (Austin et al., 2020) where youth can connect, express themselves, and access information and resources that are unavailable offline. When coming to terms with their sexuality, my homosexual informants express how online spaces helped them cope with loneliness and negative emotions:

> I became aware of my sexuality when I was 14. I was flustered, agitated, distressed, depressed, disgusted at myself.… Then I stumbled across a forum created by and for Vietnamese lesbians. It helped me a lot. (Thủy, 19, lesbian)

> I found a forum created by [an activist] with information about LGBT. It was not much, but the important thing is I could tell there were many people like me on that forum. Thanks to that, I felt I'm not alone. (Quang, 21, gay man)

These platforms provide a safe haven for LGBTQ youth to connect with others and build resilience (Austin et al., 2020; McInroy & Craig, 2015). Additionally, online spaces allow them to explore their identities in creative and empowering ways (Raun, 2015). Transgender youth, for instance, may engage in multiple self-representations on social media to weed out those who reject them (Buss et al., 2022). Vân (23, transgender woman) manages her coming-out process on social media:

> I came out on Facebook a few days before graduation […] If people discriminate against me, it would only be for one day at the (graduation) ceremony and I would not see them again. If they accept me, I'll keep my relationship with them.

Through her use of social media, Vân gains more agency and can actively choose who to include in her life, rather than being at the mercy of others' acceptance. She also uses online space to bring awareness about her experiences as a transgender woman:

> My friend and I once discussed how few Vietnamese films feature transgender people, and those that do only mock and make fun of them. Then it occurred to us to make a video for the transgender community. March 8th was approaching, so we made a YouTube video about a transgender girl's emotional experiences as she watched her cisgender female friends receiving flowers on March 8th. The video gained a lot of support and sympathy.

Vân's case is on par with Raun's (2015) research, which shows how video blogging provides a platform for transgender individuals to document their experiences in a way that is both personal and powerful, thereby advocating for themselves and their community. Likewise, Nguyên (19, transgender man) utilizes online spaces to provide information about the gender-transitioning process:

> How is it that transgender people in other countries know about hormones and the doses they need to inject for gender-transitioning, but in our country, we have to do it 'underground'? Injecting hormones without medical guidance is dangerous. So I created a group on social media to share everything I know.

Despite the presence of many health facilities that provide HIV and sexual health counselling to homosexual men, Vietnam does not have any facilities specifically dedicated to transgender people yet, and those who wish to gender transition do not have access to adequate medical and psychological support. Consequently, many Vietnamese transgender people attempt this process themselves, leading to unwanted complications, and in some cases, even death (Phạm et al., 2018). Aware of such risks, Nguyên utilizes social media to provide relevant medical information to protect others. Online spaces extend the possibilities of reach and thus provide vital resources for Nguyên and others to express their agency, either in exploring their identities or advocating for the rights of themselves and their community.

Concluding Discussion

This article explores how Vietnamese LGBTQ youth express their agency while transitioning to adulthood, drawing upon interview data from 17 LGBTQ youth in 2014. This was a pivotal time when substantial changes regarding LGBTQ issues unfolded in the Vietnamese legal landscape, offering crucial resources for LGBTQ youth. Within this context, Vietnamese LGBTQ youth assert their agency in various ways. They engage in strategic identity management, concealing or revealing their identities selectively. They rely on LGBTQ-inclusive knowledge to gain self-awareness and self-acceptance. They challenge cisnormativity and heteronormativity by expressing themselves publicly and spreading awareness about LGBTQ issues. Mobility and financial autonomy enable them to negotiate with heteronormative expectations, while online spaces offer a sense of belonging and facilitate advocacy.

Contributing to scholarship on LGBTQ emerging adulthood, the study highlights the following observations:

First, concealing visibility or self-regulation is an act of self-preservation, and therefore, an expression of agency. To expand our understanding of resilience and agency, we must acknowledge that marginalized youth navigate hostile environments with nuance and fluidity, and that their strategies may contradict conventional views of empowerment. In the case of LGBTQ youth, this requires moving beyond the visibility/invisibility binary to account for resilience strategies that may appear passive, restrictive, or submissive (Gooding et al., 2023; Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017). LGBTQ youth's resistance to hetero- and cisnormative institutions may even begin with 'going back into the closet': a momentary retreat to minimize vulnerability, reassess one's resources, and tailor one's strategies accordingly. This view resonates with studies of Black youth's 'submissive civility' (Fader, 2011) to cope with police brutality or young women's submission to sexual violence in armed conflict settings (Stallone, 2022).

Second, the findings illustrate how knowledge can be utilized as a form of 'pragmatic resistance' (Chua, 2012). Considering the role inclusive knowledge plays in facilitating self-acceptance among LGBTQ youth, a knowledge-driven approach to activism can bridge the gap between individual and collective action. Moreover, this approach to activism enables activists to achieve their goals without appearing confrontational to state authorities, ensuring the movement's survival under authoritarianism.

Third, the diverse strategies employed by different queer groups reveal how agency is multi-faceted and contingent upon various factors, namely context, resources, capabilities, and needs. Transgender individuals often lack life stability and social support compared to other queer groups, which explains why financial autonomy remains a priority for them. These findings highlight the intersectional nature of agency, urging us to consider how gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity intersect to make certain needs more pressing, and certain strategies more viable, for certain queer groups.

Finally, the study illustrates how the *unavailability* of resources can also motivate youth agencies. Recognizing the lack of supportive infrastructures for gender transitioning, my transgender informants utilize online spaces to assist their community. Here, the lack of resources is precisely what motivates these marginalized youth to engage in social advocacy. This prompts a critical question for the broader studies on motivation: to what extent does the lack of resources or adverse circumstances demotivate or, conversely, empower individuals to take action?

This study has limitations: most informants are middle-class and urban-based. The strategies identified here, thus, may not be available or helpful to Vietnamese LGBTQ youth from lower socioeconomic classes or rural areas. Moreover, given that the data collection took place almost a decade ago, further research on Vietnamese LGBTQ youth's transition to adulthood in the present time may uncover additional strategies and insights.

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