



Navigating Changing Norms Around Sex in Dating Relationships: A Qualitative Study of Young People in Vietnam

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Abstract

Social and economic changes in Vietnam since the economic restructuring of the 1980s have caused a shift in norms about premarital sex. While expectations of female chastity remain, sex before marriage is becoming more common among young people. As the formative phase of a parent randomized controlled trial, the present study examined the normative context of sex in dating relationships from the perspectives of young women and men in Vietnam. Men ($n = 12$) and women ($n = 9$) studying at two universities in Hanoi participated in semi-structured interviews that explored perspectives on sexual relationships and sexual coercion among their peers. Thematic analysis synthesized participant narratives into broader themes. Our findings confirmed that, as social norms evolve in Vietnam, young women must navigate shifting, and often contradictory, expectations about sex and dating relationships. Women and men expressed the belief that competing sexual expectations often can limit young women's sexual agency and contribute to the normalization of sexual coercion in dating relationships. However, some women were embracing greater sexual freedom and reframing norms in ways that reflected their sexual agency. Efforts are needed to address these conflicting expectations, to deepen young men's understanding of this conflict, and to prevent sexual coercion in young adulthood.

Keywords Norms · Sexual coercion · Adolescents · Qualitative research · Vietnam

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Introduction

Adolescent Dating Relationships, Premarital Sex, and Agency

The sexual revolution that took place in many societies during the last half of the 20th century led to a transformation in norms surrounding premarital sex, particularly for women (Rubinson & De Rubertis, 1991; Sherwin & Corbett, 1985). However, many of the gendered power structures that existed before the sexual revolution persist in heterosexual relationships today. For example, expectations that women should be polite and accommodating and should prioritize the sexual needs of male partners, have been highlighted in young women's narratives describing sexual encounters with men (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). A neoliberal emphasis on freedom and personal responsibility, which has underpinned much of Western thinking since the 1970s (Alfredo Filho & Johnston, 2005), has contributed to contradictory sexual expectations by failing to acknowledge the constraints on women's agency that influence their ability to negotiate consent in relationships with men (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Cense, 2019). The assumption of agency contributes to the dismissal of men's sexual aggression and to the blaming (including self-blaming) of women who engage in unwanted sex (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012), because expectations that women are responsible for actively resisting coercive behavior from partners contradicts 'traditional' expectations that women accommodate and prioritize men's sexual desire (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). Blame is shifted to women for a lack of active consent and, more generally, for failing to assert themselves (Bay-Cheng, 2019). Studies among high school and college students have documented the impact of these conflicting expectations on adolescent girls as they enter young adulthood (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Marston & King, 2006; Wight et al., 2006). In addition, normative expectations that sex is ubiquitous can compound the pressure to acquiesce to partners' sexual advances, regardless of gender (Bui & Goodson, 2007; Van de Bongardt, Reitz, Sandfort, & Deković, 2015).

Sexual Norms in Contemporary Vietnam

In Vietnam, social norms governing women's behavior contribute to the persistence of gender inequality (Bui et al., 2012; Zuo et al., 2012). Traditional gender expectations stress women's submissiveness, obedience, and passivity and men's strength, assertiveness, and dominance (Gammeltoft & Hưong, 2015). Moreover, high sex drive is associated with Vietnamese masculinity, leading young men to pursue sex in a variety of relationships as a means of bonding with male peers and proving their manhood (Horton & Rydstrom, 2011; Phinney, 2008). Prior work in Vietnam has shown that adherence to customary gender roles is associated with reduced self-efficacy in sexual communication among women in heterosexual relationships (Bui et al., 2010).

Historically, social norms associated a woman's virginity until marriage with her dignity and reputation (Gammeltoft & Hương, 2015; Nguyen & Liamputtong, 2007; Nguyen, 2007; Zuo et al., 2012), as well as her 'natural' role as a mother and builder of a happy family (Rydstrom, 2006). For many years, premarital sex in Vietnam has been viewed as morally corrupt and in the category of 'social evils' (*te nan xa hoi*), and therefore, women's sexuality has been a subject of scrutiny (Rydstrom, 2006). Premarital sex could result in severe repercussions for women and their families, including reputational damage and even loss of employment or other public sanctions (Nguyen, 2007; Rydstrom, 2006). Men's sexuality, on the other hand, has historically been naturalized and encouraged, both within and outside of marriage, rather than policed (Horton & Rydstrom, 2011; Linh & Harris, 2009). The economic and social liberalization known as *Doi Moi* that began in the 1980s has radically altered sexual norms, particularly in urban settings (Ghuman, 2005; Ghuman et al., 2006; Phinney, 2008), in the northern part of the country (Ghuman et al., 2006), and among those with higher levels of education (Ghuman, 2005). Ethnographic research has documented trends toward the commodification of sex, targeted at heterosexual men (Phinney, 2008) as well as greater acceptance of multiple concurrent partnerships and cohabitation of unmarried couples (Nguyen, 2007). For young people in urban Vietnam, sex and relationships have taken on a transactional, and sometimes adversarial, nature, with women feeling pressure to avoid being taken advantage of by young men only interested in sex, but not marriage (Gammeltoft, 2002). At the same time, shifts toward greater gender equality are evident, with more women earning wages outside the home and divorce becoming more common and less stigmatized (Loi et al., 2018; Thi, 2016, 2021). However, evidence of a gender gap in sexual permissiveness persists, with men and women both holding more negative attitudes towards women's than men's premarital sex, even with a future spouse (Do and Fu, 2010).

Despite radical shifts in Vietnamese society, young women's virginity remains a prevalent social norm today (Gammeltoft & Hương, 2015; Zuo et al., 2012). Consequently, many parents still expect daughters to abstain from premarital sex, emphasizing the risk of reputational damage that daughters and their families could endure if a daughter were to transgress this norm (Bui, 2020; Nguyen, 2007; Trinh et al., 2009). Thus, social pressure for girls to be chaste remains strong, especially outside of major metropolitan areas (Gammeltoft & Hương, 2015).

These changes have contributed to contradictions between old norms of virginity and young people's emerging expectations about having sex in casual and dating partnerships (Bui et al., 2012; Quach, 2008). Premarital sex is becoming more common (Ghuman et al., 2006), and attitudes about premarital sex are shifting, albeit more slowly among women than among men, and more slowly in rural areas than in urban ones (Do & Fu, 2010; Nguyen & Liamputtong, 2007). Thus, alongside lessons on the importance of virginity, women's peers are promoting the idea that premarital sex is normal (Quach, 2008), an expression of love, and a way to strengthen a committed relationship (Belanger & Khuat Thu, 1999; Do & Fu, 2010). An emerging norm among urban young people is that those in relationships who do not have sex do not truly love each other (Nguyen & Liamputtong, 2007). Ethnographies also

have documented men's ambivalence as traditional ideas of male privilege coexist with the reality of increasing gender equality in modern urban life, and the ways in which they reconcile this ambivalence by constructing "masculinist" gender ideologies (Martin, 2010).

With this rapid shift in sexual norms, young women may be facing a conflict between conforming to old and new behavioral expectations (Jonzon et al., 2007), especially about sex and relationships (Bui, 2020). Young women in Vietnam are exposed to contradictory expectations—that virginity is valued, but that sex in dating relationships is expected. Thus, young women are "at a confusing crossroads," trying "to balance the old and new in their concepts of love, the value of virginity and pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relations" (Khuat, 1998, p. 59). In this paper, we explored attitudes, behaviors, and normative expectations about sexual relationships among unmarried university students in urban Vietnam to understand women's perceptions of, and responses to, contradictory expectations from parents, peers, and dating partners regarding sex before marriage.

Methods

Study Overview

Emory University and the Center for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population (CCIHP), a non-governmental organization in Vietnam, collaborated on this project, aimed at adapting an evidence-based educational entertainment (edutainment) program (Salazar et al., 2014) for Vietnamese college men (Yount et al., 2020). As part of the formative phase of the parent project, men and women from varied faculties at two universities participated in semi-structured interviews (SSIs) between April and May 2018, which sought to understand the context of sexual relationships and sexual violence among university men and women in Vietnam. The Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) of Emory University and Hanoi University of Public Health granted ethical approval.

Study Setting, Eligibility, and Recruitment

This study took place in Hanoi, Vietnam, home to 7.42 million people, of whom almost 600,000 are students attending university (General Statistics Office, 2018). Participants were recruited from two prominent universities with a roughly equal gender balance.

Eligible participants were students who were 18 years or older, enrolled at one of the two universities, and ever in a dating or sexual relationship. The research team sent a brief description of the research project, purpose of the SSI, and eligibility criteria to Student Affairs personnel at each of the two universities, who circulated the recruitment materials to students. Among students who responded, the Student Affairs personnel purposively selected students for diversity of major, place of

residence, and current relationship status. Study team members reviewed the list of potential participants to ensure that the ratio of men and women was equal and the sample was diverse with respect to the academic programs represented.

Data Collection and Management

The study team developed two interview guides—one for men and one for women (Yount et al., 2020). Question sets covered the following major topics: normative expectations of men and women, expectations and experiences about sexual relationships between university men and women, and perceptions of sexual violence, including coercion. The guides were developed in English, translated into Vietnamese, and back-translated into English to ensure comparability of meaning.

Researchers at CCIHP sent an informed consent form to all eligible participants, and oral consent was obtained again at the beginning of each interview. The two female researchers administering the interviews (one of whom is an author on this paper) had a combined 16 years of experience conducting qualitative research among adolescents and young adults on sensitive topics, such as sexual health. Study personnel at Emory University and CCIHP also provided additional training to the two interviewers and to two research assistants in research ethics, interviewing technique, and rapport building in the context of sensitive topics. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and digitally recorded, and the interviewers allowed for unstructured conversation before and after the recorded part of the interview for participants to share information that they were not comfortable speaking about on the record. Each participant received VND100,000 (about USD4) as compensation. Interviews lasted approximately 90 min each and were conducted at various locations on the university campus chosen by participants.

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim into Vietnamese. Each participant was assigned a unique label to maintain confidentiality, and all identifying information was removed from the transcripts, which were stored on a secure network drive. Researchers reviewed the transcripts for quality and accuracy before translating them into English, and supervisors randomly spot-checked the translated transcripts to ensure accuracy and fidelity to the Vietnamese versions.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Three Emory researchers first familiarized themselves with the data through in-depth readings of all transcripts. These researchers then developed an initial codebook that included deductive codes derived from the interview guide, such as sexual coercion, consent, and gender norms, as well as inductive codes capturing ideas that emerged from the data, such as sexual intimacy and healthy communication. Researchers then applied the codes to two transcripts (representing both genders) to ensure inter-coder reliability. After all three analytic team members had coded one transcript, the wider team held debriefing meetings to refine and clarify the coding system. A second round of inter-coder reliability testing using the final coding

structure resulted in a kappa score of 0.65. The core analytic team reviewed fully coded transcripts to identify themes that emerged across transcripts, which were validated, refined, and contextualized through discussions with the full team. The first author constructed a matrix to map major themes across participants, as well as a second matrix comparing men's and women's narratives.

Results

Study Sample

Of the 22 students participating in the study (Table 1), one man was excluded from this analysis, as he was 30 years old, and we were interested in the perspectives of adolescents and young adults. On average, participants included in this analysis were between 20 and 21 years old and two to three years into their course of study. Most participants, especially women, lived with parents or siblings, and slightly more than half were currently in a dating relationship. [Note: We use the term "casual" partnership to refer to a sexual and/or romantic relationship without an expectation of long-term commitment. Participants typically characterized such partnerships as "one-night stands" or "friends with benefits" (English terms used). "Dating" partnerships refer to committed relationships, which participants referred to as "lovers" [người yêu] or "boyfriend/girlfriend [bạn trai/ bạn gái]." Six men and three women originated from Hanoi; these participants were more likely to attend University 2 and more likely self-report prior sexual experience. Students from University 1 tended to hold more conservative views about sex and those currently in relationships typically reported that they and their partners had agreed to remain chaste.

"I'll be Done if My Father Knows": Parental Expectations of Chastity Remain Salient for Women

All young women in the sample were conscious that parental expectations to remain chaste were tied to the family's reputation, often resulting in limitations being placed on their dress and behavior. W06 stated,

Although my dad has a sense of humor, he has a quite strict view on a woman such as clothing. My father dislikes women wearing shorts or dress, including his daughter and his wife.

Most women were keenly aware of the consequences if parents discovered they were having premarital sex. In the words of W03,

I'll be done if my father knows. I won't even need to submit myself, I'll just bang my head on the wall, done. I shouldn't do it anyway. A lot of people have had abortions, I'm really afraid [if it happens] and my parents know about it.

On the other hand, most young men described parents as largely accepting, if not necessarily approving, of their sexual behavior, including providing them with

Table 1 Characteristics of SSI participants at two universities in Hanoi, Vietnam (n=21)

ID	Sex	Year of birth	Year of study	University	Department	Province of origin	Place of residence	Current relationship
W01	F	1997	3	2	Social work	Hanoi	With parents	Yes
W02	F	1997	3	2	Accounting	Thai Nguyen	With sibling	Yes
W03	F	1997	3	2	Accounting	Hanoi	With parent	Yes
W04	F	1997	3	2	Business management	Bac Ninh	With parents	Yes
W05	F	1997	3	2	Accounting	Yen Bai	With sibling	Yes
W06	F	1997	3	1	Nursing	Hanoi	With parents	Yes
W07	F	1996	3	1	Traditional medicine	Nam Dinh	With sibling	No
W08	F	1997	3	1	Optometry	Thai Binh	With roommates	No
W09	F	1997	3	1	General practitioner	Thai Nguyen	Dormitory	No
M02	M	1997	3	2	Marketing	Hanoi	With parents	Yes
M03	M	1997	4	2	Culture and Vietnamese study	Hanoi	Alone	No
M04	M	1998	2	2	Social work	Nam Dinh	With roommates	Yes
M05	M	1996	3	2	Social work	Hanoi	With parent	No
M06	M	1999	1	2	Tourism	Hanoi	With parents	No
M07	M	1996	3	2	Culture and Vietnamese study	Hanoi	With parents	Yes
M08	M	1999	2	1	General practitioner	Phu Tho	With roommates	Yes
M09	M	1999	1	1	General practitioner	Tuyen Quang	Dormitory	No
M10	M	1997	3	1	Traditional medicine	Phu Tho	Alone	Yes
M11	M	1997	3	1	General practitioner	Outside Hanoi, not specified	Dormitory	Yes
M12	M	1995	3	1	Public health	Hanoi	With parent	No
M13	M	1998	2	1	Odonto-stomatology	Ha Nam	With siblings	Yes

contraception. After finding his condoms, M05 recounts his father saying, “It is up to you. If you run out of condoms, I will give you.” Young men’s observations of their parents’ expectations toward daughters supported this double standard, with M06 stating, “My parents follow the traditional custom that girls should be controlled strictly.” Women also recognized this double standard, with W06 explaining, “[Men] don’t have any limitations that women have such as we need to be virgins until marriage.” Some women, such as W09, pushed back against these expectations, arguing, “People used to think that drinking, gambling, or committing adultery, and exemption from doing housework are the exclusive rights granted for the men, but that shouldn’t be the case.”

However, many women’s narratives provided evidence that parental attitudes about daughters were beginning to shift. W03 was one of several women whose parents had begun to acknowledge that premarital sex among young people was becoming more common:

My mom was against cohabitation because girls’ reputation was very important and we have to keep our faces... I mean, girls need to know their limitation. Nevertheless, my mom said that it was not easy to avoid having sex at my age and if I did it, I need have safe sex.

Other women’s parents encouraged abstinence but emphasized the completion of tertiary education above marriage as the point when sex might become acceptable. W07 recounted her mother’s warning about having sex too early:

Since she knew that I was in that relationship, she often called me and said, “Don’t do anything. You still need to study”, or “Think about it after graduation,” something like that.

“Nowadays People Who Love Each Other Usually have Sex Before Marriage”: Emerging Norms Supporting Premarital Sex in Young People

The majority of participants, both men and women, presented premarital sex as a normal, and even inevitable, part of committed relationships among young people. As W02 put it, “I think nowadays people who love each other usually have sex before marriage, then it’s ‘lovers’ [người yêu].” W05, in a long-term relationship, stated, “After more than one year of the relationship, everyone thinks that we have done it... If you don’t have sex, other people question you like ‘Oh, if so is it really love?’” W08, a third-year medical student, explained,

In general, some of my friends have sex after about 3–6 months after forming their loving relationship. As far as I know, they call that period as a “climax period” when their emotions are at high level. Thus, they often have sex at that time.

While all women in the sample discussed premarital sex as occurring largely in the context of committed relationships, often with an expectation of eventual marriage,

men described their peers engaging, often concurrently, in a range of sexual relationships, including one-night stands and friends with benefits.

While the existence of male sexual needs was perceived as obvious among the majority of participants, three men in the sample acknowledged that women also had sexual needs. These young men also expressed the view that their female peers were more sexually open than in the past, with M09 stating, "I'm now more open because girls seem not to value virginity much anymore... They don't seem to want to save it until marriage." Men who noted this trend of greater sexual openness among women characterized it as a positive change, with M07 stating, "I like it when they make the move. I am just passively receiving, once they make the move I will proceed." M03 expressed the same view, stating,

Currently, I see both men and women can initiate sex rather than only men in the past. I think it is not important who initiate it. I appreciate the active initiation of anyone. Whoever wants to do it should speak out to the other side.

In contrast to these perceptions of greater sexual freedom for young women, a few participants of both genders felt that sex, and particularly casual sex, still carried substantial stigma for women. W04 suggested that some young men maintained prevailing views about women's chastity, while noting the contradictions between these views and their behavior in relationships:

It's said that the boys always want to take something away from the girl, but after a while they get fed up, they will throw it away, and only wants to marry the virgins. Do you understand? If the boys all want it that way [have sex then break up], then who's left [as a virgin] for them in this world?

These conflicting expectations led to a perceived unwillingness on the part of women to discuss sex openly, even when they were engaging in it. M09 describes this reticence, stating, "No girl will tell directly that 'I want...' or something. Probably none." Only one of the nine women interviewed admitted to being sexually active during the recorded portion of the interview, although three others reported current or past sexual activity in an unrecorded portion at the end of the main interview. M04, when asked if women at his school had one-night stands, replied, "I think for girls in my school it's probably not too common; and usually they rarely talk about it, they'd feel shy because the stereotype is that girls have to keep their virginity."

"He Asked Her to Prove It by Having Sex with Him": Committed Relationships are Risky for Women

Four women and four men in our sample were in committed relationships in which they and their partners had mutually agreed to remain chaste. Male participants who reported being in chaste relationships framed this commitment to abstinence as reluctance to disappoint parents or a potential future spouse if the current relationship did not work out, in accordance with conservative views toward premarital sex.

M10 explained that his girlfriend “has the desire, but she wants to “keep it” [virginity] and she doesn’t want to do anything wrong to her mother.”

For many women, however, maintaining a chaste relationship meant accepting some risk of coercion or infidelity from their male partners. In the words of M06,

Girls “lose” more. There are many bad boys, who leave them after having sex. It put so much pressure on girls. Men are satisfied (from having sex), so they could do it with other girls if one refuses.

W04 was one of four women and five men who described coercion as common among their peers:

If a girl doesn’t agree, but the boy does and still wants to [have sex], then after the first time, there will be a second time. The girl loves him, and she’s afraid he might break up with her, so she has to please him. Then after a while she’s over it, she’s not scared anymore, most of couples do it this way, at first the girl doesn’t agree but the boy does, then gradually they both agree and it becomes normal.

The majority of young men and women in the sample normalized men’s coercive and unfaithful behavior. W08 described her experience with a former partner who cheated on her while still characterizing him as a “good man”:

He used to badger me into doing something, but I would slap him if I didn’t like his behaviors...Even I said I didn’t like it, I went away or I teased him, he would forgive me for those behaviors. In general, he was a good man except one thing that he has two loving relationship at the same time.

There was a consistent narrative in both men’s and women’s interviews that sex was expected after a certain point in a loving relationship and that if a man had to wait too long, he would either cheat or break up. M11 described his peer’s attempt to coerce a female partner:

My high school male friend wanted to have sex. He wanted to know if the girl had feelings for him so he asked her to prove it by having sex with him and going to a hostel. He thought if she loved him she would go, but the girl said no, and that thing wouldn’t happen.

For some women, the expectations of chastity remained salient despite shifting norms around premarital sex. Ironically, young men sometimes exploited traditional expectations of chastity to pressure women to continue having unwanted sex. Both female and male participants acknowledged that women often acquiesced to such coercion not only out of desire to maintain a current relationship, but also over fears of future marriageability should their boyfriend break up with them. W02 discussed this fear in the context of a female friend:

They give their virginity to someone and don’t know what to do. If that guy can’t go with her to the end, will her future husband still respect her? In Vietnam, virginity is not too much important now, but some people still

value it. So, she must be afraid other boys who come later will look down on her, and so she's afraid he will dump her.

Contradictory norms that women remain chaste while accommodating their male partner's desires contributed to the normalization of coercive behaviors, since women were expected to give token resistance before eventually acquiescing. This belief in token resistance and an expectation of passive consent was expressed by a few men in the sample, such as M11:

Silence with acceptance means gradually accepting to have sex. It means what they want is not what they say, it's just a reaction.

However, male and female participants also described healthy communication around consent, with M03 stating,

I agreed with her decision and I stopped... We should do it only when both people want it. If only one person has the sexual desire and wants to do it but the other shows that he/she is uncomfortable, then it is coercion.

"I Am Not a Traditional Girl but I Want to be More Mature": Young Women Reframe Chastity

Despite perceptions of men's pervasive, normalized coercive behavior, agency among young women also was evident. Some women, such as W02, reported choosing wanted sex in the context of dating relationships: "In my relationship we are already too familiar with each other so I will tell him directly. If I have a sexual desire, I will speak directly... for example I want it and he also does then we will do it, or else we won't." Others expressed confidence in their ability to enforce boundaries with their male partners and/or to end the relationship if their partners persisted. W01 described an incident in which her partner at the time touched her in an unacceptable way:

One time, three months after we were in relationship, we were kissing and he was about to touch my breast, I swiped his hands off, I stopped immediately and stood up, I didn't say anything, I just looked at him then he understood, and he stopped.

Overall, only one of nine women in the sample expressed a commitment to abstinence until marriage. Two women and two men discussed female friends and acquaintances who engaged in casual sexual relationships as well, although these participants characterized casual sex as unusual. Most women in the sample described sex as something they looked forward to sharing with a committed partner in the future without marriage as a prerequisite. For example, W03 stated,

I am not a traditional girl but I want to be more mature. From my point of view, if we feel like we will go to the end and get married then I'm ready for it. But I am still studying now and don't know what the future is like

yet so I am not sure and haven't decided yet. If I have graduated and have been working then that's normal, I am ready to "cho" [give my virginity].

Discussion

Among educated, urban young men and women in contemporary Vietnam, norms about premarital sex have loosened considerably. Yet despite societal shifts toward individualism, women still face substantial constraints that often preclude their full agency in decisions around sex, particularly in committed relationships with young men. Women in this sample expressed a keen awareness of these risks and contradictions, often wishing to delay sex until they felt secure financially and/or romantically.

This analysis supports literature suggesting that premarital sex among Vietnamese youth, particularly in urban areas, is increasingly common and socially acceptable in the decades since *Doi Moi* was adopted (Hong et al., 2010). Qualitative (Nguyen & Liamputtong, 2007) and quantitative (Ghuman et al., 2006) studies also have shown that attitudes and behaviors are shifting more quickly among young men and among urban youth, and that attitudes towards men's premarital sexual activity are more permissive than attitudes toward women's. This discrepancy by gender may reflect the greater sexual freedom that men historically have enjoyed, and that women only now are beginning to experience (Rubinson & De Rubertis, 1991). Still, although premarital sex is becoming more common, its social consequences for remain salient for women and their parents.

Awareness of the consequences of premarital sex may explain contradictory perceptions of women's newfound sexual openness and their continued reticence regarding sexual matters. While women may be having more premarital sex, they are not universally comfortable discussing it. Prior studies have documented Vietnamese women's underreporting of sex, and especially of premarital sex, compared to men (Ghuman et al., 2006). This discrepancy is reflected in the recent qualitative literature describing sexual relationships among urban Vietnamese youth, in which sexually active women often feign chastity to play into the expectations of male partners (Martin, 2010; Quach, 2008). Only one of the four sexually active women in the sample admitted during the recorded interview to engaging in premarital sexual activity, and participant narratives often emphasized women's fears that they would be "found out" by parents or future partners. Likewise, parental expectations about premarital sex were shifting away from abstinence and toward prevention of pregnancy, suggesting that the appearance of chastity still was important to parents, even as modern realities made premarital sex more likely.

The persistent expectation that women appear chaste also may contribute to the normalization of coercion and a failure to seek active consent in dating relationships. Since young men believe that women will not openly express a desire for sex, or may offer token resistance, these men may interpret women's lack of strong resistance as acceptance to justify their coercive behavior (BLINDED, 2020). One participant's belief that women must be "a forced a little" into sexual

debut reflects this reliance on broader gender norms of women's passivity. The contrasting belief that sex is normal, inevitable, and a way to prove one's love and trust to a partner also featured in participants' narratives describing attempts at coercion of female partners. Ironically, the belief that men value virginity in a wife could increase women's vulnerability to accepting continued unwanted sex out of fear that marriage prospects with potential future partners already had been damaged. Thus, even with the growing acceptability of divorce and cohabitation, the gap between attitudes about premarital sex and actual behavior and the continued power differential between men and women can place women at a disadvantage in negotiating consent with male partners (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012).

Overall, the majority of women held positive attitudes about sex in the context of a committed relationship but recognized that they needed to be cautious about when and with whom they engaged in sexual activity. Most women, therefore, framed reluctance to have premarital sex in practical rather than moral terms. Almost all women interviewed did not expect to remain abstinent until marriage, yet felt that it was prudent to delay sex in their relationships until they felt romantically and financially secure. Firstly, these women wanted to feel reasonably certain that current partners would become future husbands, lessening the risk of reputational damage that might affect future marriage prospects. Secondly, they desired financial independence before risking the social consequences that an unintended pregnancy might incur.

Implications for Research and Policy

The findings from this study have important implications for research. First, the finding that sexual coercion against women is perceived as common and may be normalized in dating relationships suggests the need for climate surveys to assess the prevalence of the full continuum of sexually violent behaviors on university campuses. That women are experiencing the pressure of competing expectations for and against premarital sex also suggests the need to understand how young people's attitudes may interact with existing gender inequalities to create unique risks to women's health and well-being.

In recent years, there has been a call for evidence-based policies and programs to prevent campus sexual assault (McMahon et al., 2019). Recommendations from sexual violence researchers include establishing policies that protect all students from experiences of sexual violence, training staff to provide support services to survivors, and implementing effective sexual violence prevention programs (McMahon et al., 2019; Orchowski et al., 2020). For the latter, research to date suggests the need to address the underlying social norms that contribute to violence against women, including the normalization of sexual coercion (Yount et al., 2017) and victim-blaming of women who engage in premarital sex (Bergenfeld et al., 2020). In addition, empowerment training for women to enhance their sexual agency about the choice to have or not to have sex in dating relationships should recognize existing gendered power structures and emphasize equity in women's and men's responsibility to consent for sex (Carmody, 2003; Yount et al., 2020). While qualitative research such as

the present study is essential in the design of these social norms and empowerment-based prevention programs, randomized controlled trials are needed to provide an evidence base for their impact on the dynamics of men's and women's communication and sexual behavior in dating relationships. The formative evidence presented here has informed the parent study, which assesses the impact of an adapted edutainment program on increasing prosocial bystander behavior and reducing sexually coercive behaviors among young men through empowerment (knowledge- and skill-building) and social-norms-change approaches (Yount et al., 2020). Taken together, these findings contribute to a body of research that can inform the next generation of campus-based sexual violence prevention initiatives.

Limitations and Strengths of the Study

The limitations of this study provide guidance for future research. First, interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, and verbatim transcriptions were translated into English. Because all analyses were performed using the English translations, some of the nuances associated with terms in Vietnamese could have been lost in translation, and therefore, interpreted and analyzed inaccurately. Throughout the data analysis, however, the team cross-checked the English transcripts with the Vietnamese transcripts to ensure fidelity in the meaning of salient words or phrases. Second, due to the sensitive nature of some interview domains, participants may have responded in socially desirable ways, with men exaggerating their sexual experience and women downplaying theirs. To mitigate this possibility, the research team employed highly skilled researchers with experience building rapport and conducting sensitive interviews with adolescent populations. While this analysis focused more narrowly on norms in dating relationships, there is evidence that negotiation around consent in casual heterosexual encounters among university students differs in important ways (Lewis et al., 2021). Finally, as is typical of qualitative research, we used a relatively small sample, which was not intended to be representative of college students in Vietnam as a whole. Nevertheless, the team made efforts to recruit students purposively with diverse characteristics to reflect a range of experiences. We observed key differences in sexual norms across the two universities, which may be due a number of factors, including prevailing norms in their province of origin, socioeconomic status, or institutional norms at their university. Due to our small sample and lack of detailed demographic data, it is unclear which, if any, of the abovementioned factors contributed to these key differences, limiting our ability to draw conclusions about variations in sexual norms across the general population of university students in Hanoi.

Conclusions

Together, findings from this analysis offer new insights about experiences of university women in a rapidly changing normative environment with respect to dating relationships among young people in Vietnam. The analysis has clarified the

implications for women for present and future romantic relationships as they navigate competing norms about women's sexual behavior. The findings reveal that many young women today are responding to contradictory expectations about sex. As a result, they experience persistent risks of reputational damage, with implications for future marriage prospects, as well as emerging risks of sexual coercion in dating relationships. Effective sexual violence prevention will need to address these contradictory norms and the risks they may pose to women's well-being.

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Data Availability Codebook and de-identified English and Vietnamese transcripts are available upon reasonable request from the Project PI.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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